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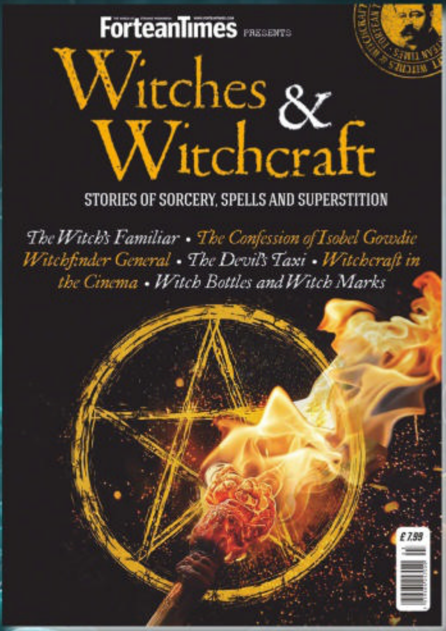
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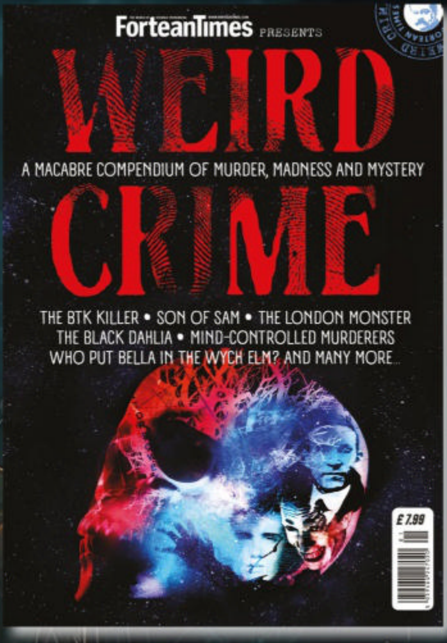
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Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

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JOHN COWPER POWYS AND *A GLASTONBURY ROMANCE*

The guilt-ridden son of a Victorian vicar, John Cowper Powys went on to channel his mystical impulses, poetic insights and sexual obsessions into a series of visionary novels. **STEVE MARSHALL** explores the life and work of one of Britain's weirdest and most wonderful writers.

38 A MINI-SEARCH FOR THE MIRACULOUS

In 1983, during a summer-long European "mini-search for the miraculous", **GARY LACHMAN** visited Stonehenge, Chartres Cathedral and other locations. This extract from his new book finds him at the site of Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, dowsing in Glastonbury, and hitchhiking to Cornwall to visit megalithic sites and to meet Colin Wilson.

42 LEGENDS OF THE HOTEL VICTOR

As well as long-abandoned mining towns, Colorado's gold rushes left plenty of myths in their wake – including ghost stories. **DR KAREN STOLLZNOW** dared to stay in the Hotel Victor's Room 301 as she went in search of the truth behind Cripple Creek's most famous haunting.

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EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

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WAY OUT WEST

In this issue of FT we present a profile of one of Britain's odder literary greats: John Cowper Powys. Powys was a strange man and a strange writer, producing utterly singular, doorstop-sized novels of visionary intensity, steeped in British history, myth and legend. We suspect they are also among the least read works in English literature, and wonder how many FT readers still have copies of the iconic Picador edition of *A Glastonbury Romance* languishing on their shelves; answers to the letters page, please. Thankfully, Steve Marshall has put in the work, tackling Powys's daunting bibliography so you don't have to; on the other hand, his article may inspire you to pick one of the books up for yourself…

FT regular Gary Lachman also turns west towards Glastonbury in an extract from his new memoir, recalling his 'mini-search for the miraculous' across the Europe of the early Eighties, a quest that also finds him searching for traces of Gurdjieff in Paris and meeting another literary hero, Colin Wilson, in Cornwall.

Dr Karen Stollznow, meanwhile, heads to the Wild West of the USA in search of the ghosts of Colorado's Cripple Creek gold rush, going so far as to spend the night in the most haunted room of the Victor Hotel. There's dedication for you. And Steve Toase enjoys a stroll around North Yorkshire's Druid's Temple – not a prehistoric stone circle but a 19th century folly frequented by bikers. He has left us wondering if we ought to employ an ornamental hermit here at Fortean Towers…

WEIRD DATES FOR YOUR DIARIES

This year's Weird Weekend North is set to take place on 11 and 12 April in its usual home in the village of Rixton, near Manchester, promising an excellent line-up of speakers (including FT regulars such as Rob Gandy, Kate Cherrell and Richard Freeman) and talks on cryptozoology, folklore, fairies, ghosts and "other downright weird stuff". Tickets, costing £50 for both days and £30 for one day, are available from https://www.weirdweekendnorth.com

In other news, WWN are also planning a one-day fortean film festival for 31 October 2026. More information is available on the WWN website, and anyone wishing to enter a film is invited to get in touch

ERRATA

463:57: The review of Ben Alderson-Day's book *Presence* was cut off, losing its last two words, and should have read: "Charles Foster finds this survey of scientific studies of 'the unseen other' to be invigorating, rigorous and highly readable, and argues that we must pay attention to outliers, stories that don't quite fit." The review also lost its rating, which should have been five stars.

464:57: The review by James Holloway of Michelle P Brown's book *Illumino* suffered similar violence, shedding part of its final sentence, which should have read: "From a fortean perspective, it provides useful context for the oddities of mediæval texts, but no more." It also lost its four-star rating from the end of the review.

ForteanTimes
WIZARD OF GLASTONBURY

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ETIENNE GILFILLAN

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WHEN PROPHECY FAILS FAILS

Seminal study of fringe belief based on "lies, omissions and manipulation"

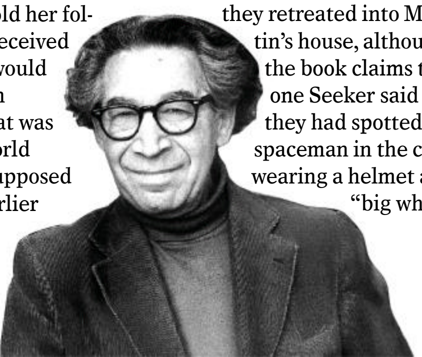
ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: Dorothy Martin is helped into her home, with Dr Charles Laughead behind her, on 24 Dec 1954 after the "spacemen" failed to appear. **BELOW**: Leon Festinger, one of the authors of *When Prophecy Fails*.

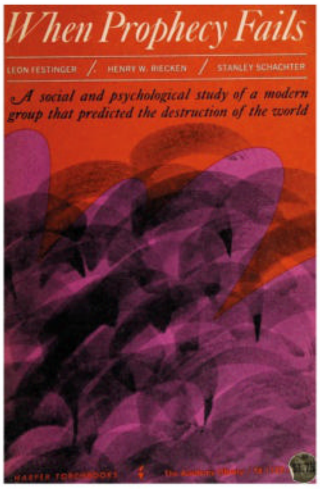
The 1956 book *When Prophecy Fails,* by Leon Festinger, Henry W Riecken and Stanley Schachter has been one of the most influential books of the last century in the fields of new religious studies, cult research and social psychology. It explores the aftermath of an event that took place on Christmas Eve 1954, when Dorothy Martin, a Chicago housewife, psychic, and leader of a small UFO group called the Seekers, asked her followers to assemble outside her house to sing carols and await the arrival of "spacemen".

This event was a follow up to another prophecy from Martin; previously she had told her followers that she had received a vision that a UFO would land and rescue them from a great flood that was about to bring the world to an end. This was supposed to have happened earlier in December, and when it didn't Martin explained this by saying that she had received a psychic update from God, who had changed his mind. He had told her that the Seekers had managed to spread so much "light" with their adherence to God's will that He had decided to spare the world, and instead aliens in a flying saucer would just visit the Seekers on Christmas Eve.

At the appointed time, 6pm, in front of an assembled crowd of the curious, including many journalists, the Seekers sang and waited, staying there for several hours until it was clear nothing was going to happen, after which they retreated into Martin's house, although the book claims that one Seeker said that they had spotted a spaceman in the crowd wearing a helmet and "big white gown", who had been invisible to non-believers.



She had received an update from God, who had changed his mind



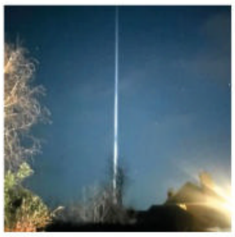
When Prophecy Fails

LEON FESTINGER / HENRY W. RIECKEN / STANLEY SCHACHTER

A social and psychological study of a modern group that predicted the destruction of the world

However, not all the assembled Seekers were UFO believers; several were undercover social psychologists, studying the group to see how they would react when aliens repeatedly failed to appear, and their experiences formed the basis for *When Prophecy Fails.* The authors wrote that rather than being disillusioned by the repeated failure of Martin's prophecies, members of the Seekers doubled down on their belief in aliens, and asserted that they would still come one day. The experience was described as making their faith stronger, with the Seekers becoming more eager to promote their beliefs, making extra efforts to reach out and convert others and to get their ideas through to journalists and anyone else who would listen.

Festinger and his colleagues went on to use their findings as core evidence to establish the psychological concept of cognitive dissonance. This arises when someone simultaneously holds two conflicting beliefs, beliefs that conflict with their actions, or ones that clash with reality. They also discussed how we carry out "dissonance reduction" – the methods we use to reduce psychological pressure and unease felt when confronted with information that clashes with firmly held beliefs. *When Prophecy Fails* also had a significant and lasting influence on how UFO groups and other organisations that investigate or promote what are seen as fringe ideas are viewed, enabling them to be painted as irrational cultists who cannot be



LIGHTS IN THE SKY
Puzzling pillars of light seen across Britain
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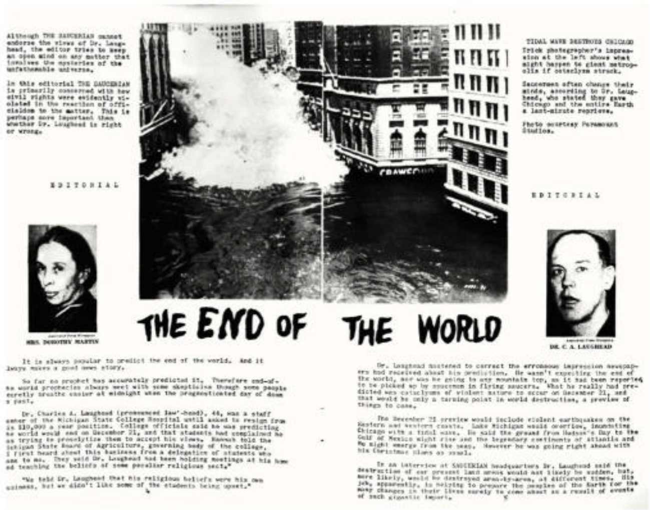
WHOLE LOT OF HOLES
The mystery of Serpent Mountain
PAGE 12

BOUD
Avez-vous déjà vu un rat ?

BAD RAP FOR RODENTS?
The rat-happy mayor of Belleville
PAGE 23



Although THE SAUCERIAN cannot endorse the views of Dr. Laughead, the editor tries to keep an open mind on any matter that involves the mysteries of the unfathomable universe.

In this editorial THE SAUCERIAN is primarily concerned with how civil rights were evidently violated in the reaction of officialdom to the matter. This is perhaps more important than whether Dr. Laughead is right or wrong.

EDITORIAL

MRS. DOROTHY MARTIN

THE END OF THE WORLD

It is always popular to predict the end of the world. And it lways makes a good news story.

So far no prophet has accurately predicted it. Therefore end-of-he world prophecies always meet with some skepticism though some people ecretly breathe easier at midnight when the prognosticated day of doom s past.

Dr. Charles A. Laughead (pronounced law'-hed), 44, was a staff ember of the Michigan State College Hospital until asked to resign from is $10,000 a year position. College officials said he was predicting he world would end on December 21, and that students had complained he as trying to proselytize them to accept his views. Hannah told the ichigan State Board of Agriculture, governing body of the college, I first heard about this business from a delegation of students who ame to me. They said Dr. Laughead had been holding meetings at his home nd teaching the beliefs of some peculiar religious sect."

"We told Dr. Laughead that his religious beliefs were his own usiness, but we didn't like some of the students being upset."

TIDAL WAVE DESTROYS CHICAGO
Trick photographer's impression at the left shows what might happen to giant metropolis if cataclysm struck.

Saucermen often change their minds, according to Dr. Laughead, who stated they gave Chicago and the entire Earth a last-minute reprieve.

Photo courtesy Paramount Studios.

EDITORIAL

DR. C. A. LAUGHEAD

Dr. Laughead hastened to correct the erroneous impression newspapers had received about his prediction. He wasn't expecting the end of the world, nor was he going to any mountain top, as it had been reported, to be picked up by spacemen in flying saucers. What he really had predicted was cataclysms of violent nature to occur on December 21, and that would be only a turning point in world destruction, a preview of things to come.

The December 21 preview would include violent earthquakes on the Eastern and Western coasts. Lake Michigan would overflow, inundating Chicago with a tidal wave. He said the ground from Hudson's Bay to the Gulf of Mexico might rise and the legendary continents of Atlantis and Mu might emerge from the seas. However he was going right ahead with his Christmas plans as usual.

In an interview at SAUCERIAN headquarters Dr. Laughead said the destruction of our present land areas would not likely be sudden, but, more likely, would be destroyed area-by-area, at different times. His job, apparently, is helping to prepare the peoples of the Earth for the many changes in their lives surely to come about as a result of events of such gigantic import.

LEFT: The Seekers and their beliefs were covered in the Spring 1955 issue of *The Saucerian*. **BELOW**: Dr Charles Laughead, one of Dorothy Martin's most convinced followers, had his sanity questioned in the press.

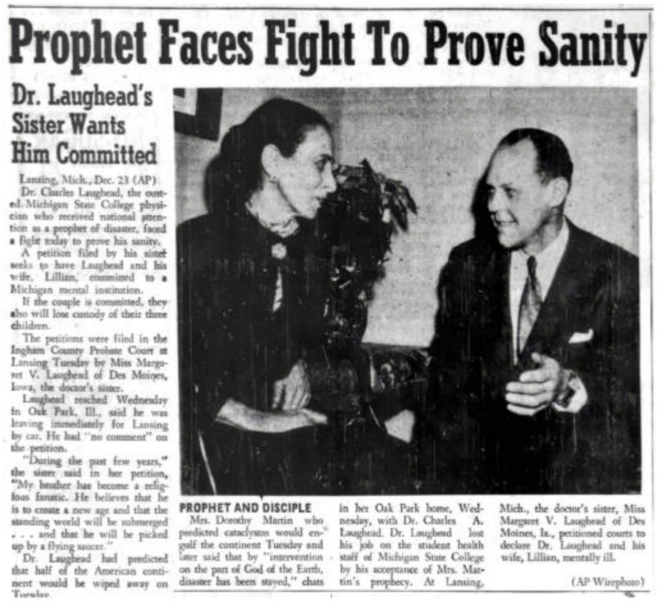
dissuaded from their beliefs, no matter what.

However, a paper published by Thomas Kelly in the peer-reviewed *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* examines the now deceased Festinger's archives, held at the University of Michigan, which were unsealed in early 2025. Documents found there paint a very different picture of what happened in the Seekers after the spacemen failed to turn up, and this is so much at odds with *When Prophecy Fails* that Kelly concludes that the book "leans on lies, omissions, and serious manipulation."

In fact, the records show that after the aliens refused to manifest, all the group members showed clear signs of giving up their beliefs, and that it wasn't long before the Seekers dispersed. Some remained involved with ufology, but no longer believed a world-ending flood was coming or that they were going to be rescued by a flying saucer, rapidly disavowing these ideas. Even Martin went on to say that she never believed they would actually be taken up by a physical spacecraft. "Dorothy Martin distanced herself completely from these events, even rewriting the story of how she developed her psychic powers," Kelly explains. Rather than claiming she discovered she was psychic after awakening with a tingling sensation, which, she strongly implied, involved some sort of alien intervention, she changed the story to saying that "she had been in a car accident, developed cancer, and was miraculously healed by an appearance of Jesus Christ", after which she found she was psychic.

Kelly found that the researchers had committed serious scientific misconduct during the research for *Prophecy*, at one point even breaking into Martin's house to search it. They also engaged in "fabricated psychic messages, covert manipulation, and interference in a child welfare investigation", with some researchers using their membership of the Seekers to try and push the group in the direction they clearly wanted them to go.

Subsequent studies of new religious movements and other similar groups have never managed to replicate *Prophecy's* findings, and although Kelly still thinks the concepts of cognitive dissonance and dissonance reduction remain valid, he says that he hopes his paper will show that "the conventional wisdom is just wrong. The expected outcome of a failed prophecy, what normally happens, is that the cult dies". *motherjones.com, 25 Nov 2025; onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/jhbs.70043, 4 Nov 2025.*



Prophet Faces Fight To Prove Sanity

Dr. Laughead's Sister Wants Him Committed

Lansing, Mich., Dec. 23 (AP)
Dr. Charles Laughead, the ousted Michigan State College physician who received national attention as a prophet of disaster, faced a fight today to prove his sanity.

A petition filed by his sister seeks to have Laughead and his wife, Lillian, committed to a Michigan mental institution.

If the couple is committed, they also will lose custody of their three children.

The petitions were filed in the Ingham County Probate Court at Lansing Tuesday by Miss Margaret V. Laughead of Des Moines, Iowa, the doctor's sister.

Laughead reached Wednesday in Oak Park, Ill., said he was leaving immediately for Lansing by car. He had "no comment" on the petition.

"During the past few years," the sister said in her petition, "My brother has become a religious fanatic. He believes that he is to create a new age and that the standing world will be submerged . . . and that he will be picked up by a flying saucer."

Dr. Laughead had predicted that half of the American continent would be wiped away on Tuesday.

PROPHET AND DISCIPLE
Mrs. Dorothy Martin who predicted cataclysms would engulf the continent Tuesday and later said that by "intervention on the part of God of the Earth, disaster has been stayed," chats in her Oak Park home, Wednesday, with Dr. Charles A. Laughead. Dr. Laughead lost his job on the student health staff of Michigan State College by his acceptance of Mrs. Martin's prophecy. At Lansing, Mich., the doctor's sister, Miss Margaret V. Laughead of Des Moines, Ia., petitioned courts to declare Dr. Laughead and his wife, Lillian, mentally ill.

(AP Wirephoto)

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

GIANT PURPLE DINOSAUR CAUGHT FLY-TIPPING ON CCTV IN SOUTHEND

BBC News 6 Dec 2025.

Man dies of rabies after kidney transplant from donor who saved kitten from skunk

The Guardian, 9 Dec 2025.

MAN ACCUSED OF EATING FABERGÉ EGG INSPIRED BY JAMES BOND

[AP] 3 Dec 2025.

Albino badger could scupper £25m stately home refurbishment

D.Telegraph, 18 Dec 2025.

SIDELINES

GNOME TOWN

Accrington in Lancashire has been inundated with a tide of tiny plastic gnomes, with hundreds of them being found squirrelled away in nooks and crannies across the town. There's no mystery about their origin though; they have been produced by 3D printing shop owner, Michael, for his daughter Amara, 7, to hide because she likes "to make other people smile". Michael says there are "so many people wanting to find them, saying they're gonna go out just to look for gnomes" and he encourages people to take photos of the them and post them online. "It could be a little happy thing for Accrington town I think." *BBC News, 12 Jul 2025.*

CRUMBS!

In Ireland, the Green Party representative at a circular economy event organised to promote an app enabling people to buy heavily discounted leftover food from local shops and cafes was named Jamie Crummie. *Irish Times, 5 Oct 2024.*

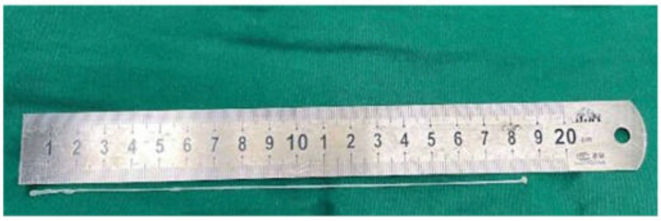
TIKTOK TEA

In a spoof seemingly designed to prank gullible Americans, posters on TikTok have been warning people about the British "Tea Alarm". This is claimed to be a siren, similar to those used for air raids, that sounds nationwide at 3pm every day as a signal for everyone to stop what they are doing and drink compulsory tea. Posters assert that those dodging the mandatory beverage consumption get £80 fines and that tea refusers need exemption cards for special circumstances. Four million people have posted on the topic, and even the official accounts of Greggs, John Lewis and Blenheim Palace have joined in with the hoax. *metro.co.uk, 20 Mar 2025.*

MARTIN ROSS

MEDICAL BAG

FT's doctors advise: don't eat snake bladders, live frogs, magnets or 3kg of cola bottles...



LEFT: The 18cm worm found in the brain of a man from Hunan, China. **BELOW**: Nathan Rimmington after his ill-advised cola bottle binge.

SNAKE REVENGE

Some years after he had swallowed a snake's raw gall bladder "for a dare", a man named Li, from Hunan, China, started getting optical disturbances in the form of a "mosaic like thing" appearing in his vision. When he visited an ophthalmologist, they found nothing wrong with his eyes, but an MRI scan showed there was a foreign object behind them. However, as the visual problems had ceased, Li decided not to undergo the surgery needed to investigate further. Some months later, though, he started blacking out, foaming at the mouth, and had convulsions, leading to another MRI that identified a worm living in his brain. This time, surgeons carried out a craniotomy to extract the unwelcome guest, and managed to remove an intact 18cm (7in) parasite, still wriggling. This was identified as the larva of the tapeworm *Spirometra mansoni*, commonly found in frogs, snakes, and birds, often known as the sparganum worm, which doctors believed had grown from an egg in the snake gallbladder consumed years before. After the operation, Li made a full recovery, and was discharged 10 days later. *mothership.sg, 2 Sept 2025.*

FROGS IN THE THROAT

Luckier was an 82-year-old Chinese woman, identified only by her surname, Zhang, who was admitted to hospital in Hangzhou with severe abdominal pain. Doctors were initially baffled as to the cause, but eventually the reluctant Zhang revealed that the problem had started after she had used a folk remedy to treat pain from a herniated disc, which involved swallowing several live frogs.

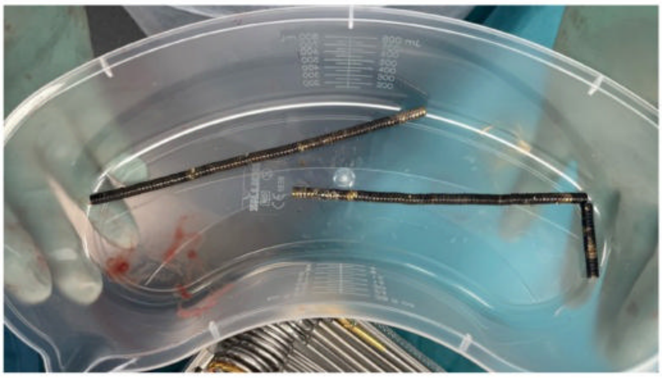
Zhang had asked her relatives to collect small frogs for her without telling them what she was intending to do with them, then swallowed three one day, followed by five the next. Once she told them what she had done, doctors were able to trace the pain to a parasitic infection, with a hospital spokesperson saying: "Swallowing frogs has damaged the patient's digestive system and resulted in some parasites being present in her body, including sparganum." After two weeks of treatment Zhang was deemed to be free of parasites and was discharged from hospital. Luckily, the infection had been caught early, so she did not experience the kind of vision impairment or brain damage suffered by Li in Hunan. *dailymail.co.uk, 8 Oct 2025.*

HARIBO HORROR

Seized by a "hankering for cola bottles", a jelly sweet made by Haribo, Nathan Rimmington, 33, from Barnsley ordered a 3kg (6.6lb) bag of them and tucked in, managing to eat the lot in three days. "The bag was packed to the rafters with cola bottles – like a sandbag," he said. "I just couldn't stop eating them." Even on the first day, Rimmington's cola bottle consumption made him feel a bit queasy, but he continued his binge nonetheless, and on the third day, a Sunday, he went out for a carvery lunch, then finished the bag for dessert. The next day, he was sweating heavily and "did not feel right". He assumed this was the result of some off pork in his carvery meal, but on Tuesday he was in so much pain he could not walk.

When he visited the doctor, he was found to have "astronomically high" blood pressure as well as continuing severe pain, so was referred to hospital where tests for food poisoning came back negative and a CT scan revealed nothing. "But after an internal investigation they asked if I liked sweets because I was completely blocked up with gelatin," Rimmington said. He was diagnosed with acute diverticulitis, sudden inflammation and infection of the large intestine, with doctors saying they were surprised his binge hadn't killed him. Rimmington was hooked up to IV drips to flush out his system and reprimanded by a consultant for his irresponsibility, admitting, "It's not the cleverest thing I have ever done in my life – I can't even look at a cola bottle now." *BBC News, 10 Oct 2025.*

KENNEDY NEWS AND MEDIA



ABOVE: The magnets removed from the intestines of a 13-year-old boy in Tauranga Hospital in New Zealand.

MAGNETIC MISERY

A 13-year-old boy admitted to Tauranga hospital in North Island, New Zealand, with abdominal pain "disclosed ingesting approximately 80 to 100 5x2mm high-power (neodymium) magnets about one week prior" for reasons that he did not make clear. An X-ray revealed that the magnets were lodged in the boy's intestines, connected together to form four straight lines. "These appeared to be in separate parts of bowel adhered together due to magnetic forces," medics said. The magnets had squeezed together different sections of his small and large intestines, causing tissue to die at the points of contact. This required surgery to remove both the magnets and the necrotised tissue, which was in danger of becoming infected, and the boy was able to return home after eight days of treatment. *theguardian.com, 24 Oct 2025.*

PHANTOM BOOBWATCH

Retired teacher Mark Bryan, 45, had laser surgery to remove scar tissue in his right eye caused by diabetic retinopathy, after which he needed to wear an eye patch while he recovered. Shortly after his operation, though, while frying sausages, he caught a glimpse of a pair of sizeable women's breasts out of the corner of his eye. The image disappeared after a few minutes, but from then on kept recurring at unexpected moments, popping up when he was brushing his teeth or watching TV, and even when his eyes were closed. Bryan nicknamed the hallucination "Taloula", and said it was like having "Pamela Anderson pinned to my face," adding, "My wife kept looking at me like I'd lost my mind."

> *"It was like having Pamela Anderson pinned to my face"*

Doctors diagnosed Bryan with Charles Bonnet syndrome, which causes hallucinations in people with significant vision loss (see **FT125:14, 184:46-49, 321:53-54**). These can range from simple patterns to complex moving scenes, and are caused by the brain compensating for the lack of information coming from the eyes. As part of his operation, medics had injected a bubble of air into Bryan's eye, and, he said, as the bubble wobbled about, so did the boobs, making them "very animated". After two days of the mammary hallucinations, Bryan wouldn't leave the house, as the breasts became superimposed on people he saw while out and about, which he found disconcerting and embarrassing. However, much to his relief, the hallucinations subsided as his right eye healed and vision improved, and after 10 days they ceased. *plymouthherald.co.uk, 6 Nov 2025.*

ABOVE: Retired teacher Mark Bryan started hallucinating a pair of large breasts following laser surgery on his right eye.

MARK BRYAN / SWNS

BOLTED

After they had not heard from him for two days, a concerned relative asked the carabinieri to check on a 64-year-old relative in Ancona, Italy. Forcing open the man's door, officers found him lying on his bed with the end of a crossbow bolt sticking out of his forehead. The man was still alive and conscious, so was rushed to hospital where doctors said he "babbled incoherently, but could still speak". He told them that his injury had happened two days before, and that he had not managed to eat or drink since.

The victim was a known crossbow enthusiast and it seems the injury had been self-inflicted, although it was not clear whether this had been accidental or deliberate. "The arrow passed through his skull from forehead to nape. He was lucky. I've never seen anything like it in Italy," said Maurizio Iacoangeli, head of Neurosurgery at the Torrette hospital in Ancona. "A millimetre further and the patient would have died instantly."

As the crossbow bolt was made out of carbon fibre, it was possible to give the victim a CT scan, allowing surgeons to understand exactly how it had passed through his brain. This enabled them to operate to remove the bolt without causing further damage or catastrophic bleeding, although the patient remained in a serious condition and his survival was in the balance. *corriere.it, 5 Aug 2025.*

SIDELINES

CHICKEN RAGE

When Cynthia Sosa, 38, of Key West, Florida, stopped to allow a chicken to cross the road, she was incensed that another driver "began honking at her and later passed her, running over the chicken". Sosa pursued the chicken killer and when she caught up, blocked the road in front of their car and tried to force her way into the vehicle, and when she failed, sprayed bear mace through the window into the driver's face. Sosa then fled, but police swiftly pulled her over and arrested her for aggravated battery and burglary with assault or battery. *local12.com, 16 Jul 2025.*

SPUD U LICK

Asked by food delivery company Ocado to come up with a novel summer recipe, chef Poppy O'Toole, 31, lived up to her nickname "the Potato Queen" and created potato and bacon ice cream. This involves mashed Maris Piper potatoes, condensed milk, whipped cream, and vanilla, topped with maple bacon, and was described by TV cook Nigella Lawson as "fabulous". *Mail on Sunday, 15 Jun 2025.*

TELEPORTING MOG?

Staff at a branch of clothing store Primark in Leicester were surprised to find a black fluffy cat abandoned beneath a pile of Bart Simpson jumpers. After it was retrieved by the RSPCA, Inspector Richard Durrant said: "It is very odd for someone to abandon a cat in the middle of a busy shop." The animal was found to be in good health and was taken to a local cattery. *D.Star, 21 Jan 2024.*

SLIPPERY SECRET

For 200 years it has been thought that ice is slippery because even the slightest pressure or friction melts a thin surface layer on which everything slides. In fact, Martin Müser from Saarland University has discovered, ice's slipperiness derives from the interaction between electrical charges in its water molecules and those in any surface in contact with it. This causes the surface structure of the ice to become disordered and lose cohesion, so that it reverts to being a liquid, making the surface slippery without the need for pressure or friction. *sciencedaily.com, 12 Sept 2025.*

SIDELINES...

FOUR PERCENTERS

In a poll of 2,000 British people, four per cent agreed with the proposition that Trump "was either a zombie or a 'hologram' created by the CIA", with six per cent in the 18 to 24 age range suspecting this might be true. One responder, Alastair Taylor, 27, of Canterbury, Kent, said that he thought Trump had been "raised from the dead" by US operatives, who now controlled him. *dailystar.co.uk, 18 Jan 2025.*

THAMES TERROR?

Almost simultaneously with the release of the Netflix film *Under Paris*, about a giant killer shark in the Seine, the report of a shark in the Thames near Hammersmith Bridge in West London caused a stir. Charlotte Webb, 25, who spotted the creature's fin said: "I had no idea sharks swam in the Thames. I thought it was fake or a bean bag floating along at first." Once posted online, her video resulted in the fish being identified as a Tope Shark, which breed in the Thames Estuary and can reach six feet in length. *dailystar.co.uk, 24 Jun 2025.*

WHEELIE GOOD

After experimenting with various hi-tech methods for dispersing birds and other "problematic wildlife" from its air bases, including using Boston Dynamics' dog-like robot, Spot, the US military has found a much cheaper and simpler solution. They have taken to using life size plastic coyotes mounted on toy remote control vehicles which have been given the name "Coyote Rovers". While Spot proved too slow and wasn't recognised as a threat by most wildlife, the Coyote Rovers can hit 20mph and scare off almost everything, plus they cost just $2,500 each, while a single Spot robot is $74,500. *popsci.com, 10 Jul 2025.*

MARTIN ROSS

RACCOON RUCKUS

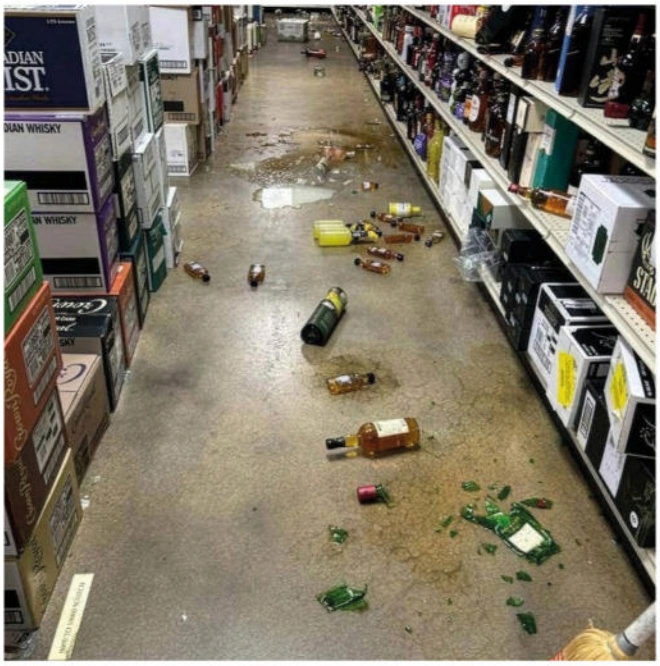
Masked trash pandas get drunk, smoke drugs and wreak havoc

SELF-DOMESTICATING RACCOONS

Over the years, Raccoons, which originally lived in woodland, have become as ubiquitous in North American cities as urban foxes are in the UK. In the wild they eat insects, fish, nuts and berries, but in cities they raid bins and live off human leftovers, earning them the nickname "trash pandas". Research by University of Arkansas biologist Raffaela Lesch has found that this change of habitat is having a significant effect on the raccoons.

With her students, Lesch used the community science platform iNaturalist to look at 20,000 photographs of raccoons from across the US and compare the appearance of the urban animals with that of their wild relatives. They discovered that urban raccoons are undergoing a process of "self-domestication" – taking on some of the characteristics of domesticated species like dogs. Domesticated species tend to develop shorter snouts, floppier ears and different colour patterns, and become less afraid of people. Animals don't need to be actively domesticated to undergo this process; it can begin when an animal is still wild, but lives in close proximity to humans.

Lesch's team discovered that urban raccoons had developed snouts that were, on average, 3.5 per cent shorter than that of their rural relatives and appeared to be beginning to have floppier ears. She believes this is happening because "if you have an animal that lives close to humans, you have to be well-behaved enough. That selection pressure is quite intense." *scientificamerican.com,14 Nov 2025*



ABOVE: The trail of destruction left in a Virginia liquor store by a rampaging raccoon, and the drunken culprit found face-down in the staff bathroom.

RACCOON RAMPAGE

Well-behaved is not how most people would describe a raccoon in Ashland, Virginia. Staff at Ashland ABC liquor store arrived at work in early December to discover a "chaotic scene" in the shop, with the aisles littered with smashed bottles and pools of spirits. Suspecting a burglary, employees carefully searched the building and found the culprit passed out face down next to the toilet in the staff bathroom – a very drunk raccoon. "He fell through one of the ceiling tiles and went on a full-blown rampage, drinking everything," said animal control officer Samantha Martin. Martin took the sozzled animal back to the Hanover County Animal Shelter, where, she said, "After a few hours of sleep and zero signs of injury (other than maybe a hangover and poor life choices), he was safely released back to the wild, hopefully having learned that breaking and entering is not the answer." *telegraph.co.uk, 3 Dec 2025.*

ABOVE: Gangs of raccoons on the streets of Kassel in Germany. **BELOW LEFT**: The raccoon that made a surprise appearance in a Wisonsin restaurant. **BOTTOM LEFT**: Chewy the raccoon, with meth pipe, busted in Springfield, Ohio.

RACCOON RESTAURANT RIOT

In Grand Geneva, Wisconsin, the raccoon did not bother to wait until closing time. It crashed through the ceiling of Ristorante Brissago at 7.30pm, peak dining time, when the restaurant was full of customers. The animal landed on an occupied table in the middle of the dining room, at which guests were eating, and instantly caused chaos. The "large and aggressive" raccoon careened around the restaurant "brawling, scratching and hissing", triggering panic among the guests, one of whom attempted to grab the animal and was bitten severely for his pains. Eventually police officers, accompanied by Matt Snorek of Guaranteed Gone Wildlife Control, arrived to bring the situation under control. Snorek cornered the raccoon in a side room and grabbed it with a dog catcher's pole, after which an officer corralled it into a dustbin. They took the miscreant to a vet, where the animal was euthanised, then sent to be tested for rabies, while his victim received hospital treatment. "When it gets brutally cold it's not uncommon to get these calls for raccoons going into a structure," said Snorek. *Fox6now.com, 15 Dec 2025.*

METH RACCOON

Police in Springfield, Ohio, had what they described as a "strange encounter on patrol" when they pulled over a car belonging to Victoria Vidal, 55. Sitting on the front seat next to Vidal was her pet raccoon, Chewy, nonchalantly sucking on a glass meth pipe. This prompted officers to carry out a thorough search of the vehicle, during which they found a large amount of methamphetamine, some crack cocaine and three used glass meth pipes, resulting in Vidal's immediate arrest. "Finding a raccoon holding a meth pipe is a first!" said a police spokesperson. *abcnews.com, 7 May 2025.*

RACCOON THROWING

In Murray, Kentucky, Jonathan Mason, 40, known locally as "Cowboy Cody" was arrested for throwing an angry raccoon into the Big Apple Bar and Grill after he was refused entry following "a drunken mule incident". The panicked raccoon ran about making "a shrieking growl" and bit an employee on the hand before someone with raccoon-handling skills managed to wrap the animal in a towel and turf it out of the bar. *nypost.com, 10 Jun 2025.*

THIRD REICH-COONS

The city of Kassel in Hesse, central Germany, has been being dubbed the "raccoon capital of Europe" and is now home to thousands of the omnivorous mammals, which take over the parks and streets at night. They were introduced to Nazi Germany in the 1930s for fur farming, but, as with other invasive species, some escaped into the wild and others were released deliberately. With raccoon numbers increasing exponentially, they were hunted and culled in an attempt to control the growing population and mitigate its effects on local wildlife. Now, Kassel has apparently given up on expelling the invaders and is instead suggesting residents learn how to live alongside them, offering advice on raccoon-proofing homes to keep the masked marauders out. *Sun, 10 Apr; Guardian, 19 June 2025.*

SIDELINES...

BADGERED BY BADGERS

Susan Lupton, 63, from Freshwater Bay on the Isle of Wight, set fire to a neighbour's car in an attempt to kill the badgers living on his driveway. She believed that the badgers, which were being cared for by wildlife volunteer Graham Lee, had killed a local cat, and became "irrationally obsessed" with getting revenge, dubbing Lee the "evil badger man" in a torrent of posts on Facebook. The inferno destroyed the vehicle and caused £18,500 of damage to a neighbouring property, after which Lupton was arrested, charged with criminal damage, and sectioned for mania. The badgers were unharmed, and Lee said the cat had simply died of old age. *metro.co.uk, 3 Jul 2025.*

A NAKED MAN…

Drivers passing the Middleton Archer pub in Rochdale, Greater Manchester, were surprised to see a naked man "running over the roundabout" and randomly lunging at vehicles. One driver described how the nudist "tried to attack my car as I picked my daughter up from the gym", and another had him climb into their car through the driver's window. A local said, "He was fighting a tree at one point." Pub customers eventually pinned down the violent streaker until police arrived. *dailystar.co.uk, 29 Jun 2025.*

BEAM ME UP

Christian Nationalist pastor Andrew Isker, from Tennessee, refuses to walk through airport scanners in case the electric field they use "turns him gay", saying, "I'm not going through the gay beam machine." He requests that male airport staff pat him down thoroughly instead. *D.Mirror, 12 Apr 2025.*

HARRIS V HARRIS

For weeks, a Harris hawk that had escaped from a falconer terrorised the village of Flamstead, Hertfordshire. The bird particularly hated tall men, and would swoop down to attack them, sometimes drawing blood. People were unable to use their gardens for fear of the bird, and some took to wearing cycling helmets whenever they left the house. However, spotting the raptor sitting on his shed, appropriately named local Steve Harris pounced and trapped it by throwing a cage over it. A falconer is now caring for the hawk. *BBC News, 4 Apr 2025.*

SIDELINES...

FIZZY BEAR

Sharon Rosel, of Vancouver, Canada, did not expect any trouble when she left 72 cans of fizzy pop, bought for her food truck, in her car overnight. However, at 3am she was awoken by the sound of her car window being smashed; a large bear had sniffed the drinks out and broken in. "I never thought it could smell pop through a can," Rosel said. The bear worked its way through almost the whole lot, systematically drinking the orange crush, cola and root beer, but leaving three cans of diet cola. The animal didn't break the cans open with its paws: "It used its teeth every time," said Rosel, adding, "You could hear him slurping for an hour and a half." *Sun, 21 Apr 2025.*

CRUSTACEAN RUSTLING

Police on the Japanese island of Amari arrested three men aged 24, 26 and 27, after staff at their hotel noticed that their suitcases were "rustling". Investigating, they found that the luggage contained "thousands" of local hermit crabs. Only found on the island, they are "a national treasure", and export is banned. One man had 95kg (200lb) of the crustaceans in his luggage, while another had a further 65kg (143lb) stashed. The crabs can be worth up to £100 each in China, but police were unsure whether they were going to be sold as pets or eaten. *BBC News, 11 May 2025.*

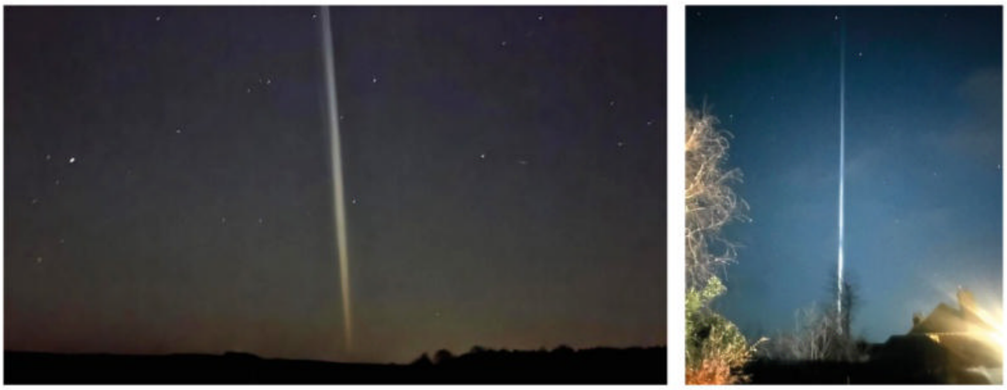
BIGBUTT

Edward Henry, 47, and his son, 12, were bow fishing near Monroe, Michigan, when, they say, "their dog scared something up". Heading towards it, the Henrys saw "a big heavy animal hit the ground" and run off on two legs. They estimated it was six foot tall, even when hunched, and "was as big as a bear, but it looked like a gorilla". Although the Henrys did not get a good look at it, they told the Ohio Bigfoot Field Researchers Organisation that they "could see the hairy back and big butt cheeks pretty clearly." *D.Star, 31 May 2025.*

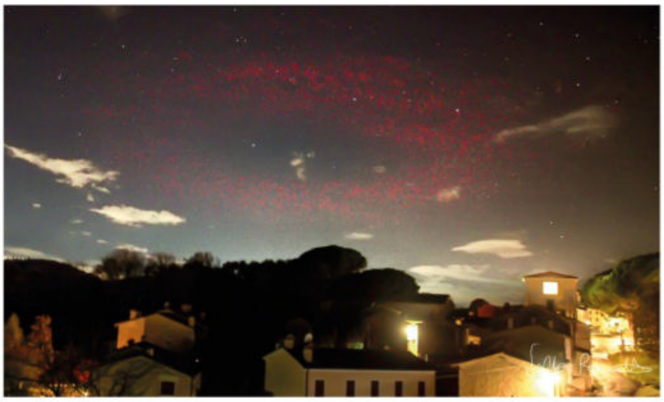
MARTIN ROSS

LIGHTS IN THE SKY

Mysterious pillars seen across the UK while ELVEs return to Italy



JAMIE HAMILTON / NORTH YPRKSHIRE WEATHER UPDATES



VALER BINOTTO

TOP: The light pillar seen over Feltwell, Norfolk, and Robin Hood's Bay, North Yorkshire. **ABOVE**: Valter Binotto's photo of ELVEs over Possagno.

PILLAR OF LIGHT

A bright, greenish, beam of light was seen in the sky near Feltwell in Norfolk on 3 December at around 5am, not far from the US air bases in Suffolk, prompting speculation about aliens. Jim NR Dale, from British Weather Services, said he believed it was a natural phenomenon known as a light pillar, which can form when clouds containing ice reach the lower levels of the atmosphere during cold winter nights. When illuminated by light from the ground, the crystals act like mirrors and reflect the light downwards creating the appearance of pillars. Dale thought it was possible that in this case the pillar was formed by reflected moonlight, but that an artificial light on the ground was more likely. Later in the day, though, sightings came in from across the UK, which makes it unlikely that this was a light pillar, as they are relatively localised phenomena. Jonathan McDowell of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in the US, said, "It was definitely the Chinese Zhuque-3 rocket making its first test flight. It passed over the UK and northern Europe at around 05:00 GMT at the end of its first orbit, following launch from China at 04:02 GMT. Chinese upper stages have been previously observed to make long, linear propellant-dump trails." As it was high in the atmosphere, the trail was visible over a wide area and reflected light from the Sun while it was still below the horizon, creating the illuminated pillar appearance. *edp24.co.uk, 3 Dec; BBC News, 6 Dec 2025.*

RED CIRCLE RETURNS

For the second time in three years, a photo has captured a halo of red light over the small Italian town of Possagno. While some media outlets strained to make a mystery out of this, it was a known, but elusive, phenomenon, and the fact that two photos of it were taken in the same town is the result of a specialist photographer living there. The rings were ELVEs (short for "emission of light and very low-frequency perturbations due to electromagnetic pulse sources"), a lightning-related phenomenon discovered in the 1990s. ELVEs are formed when powerful lightning bolts send electromagnetic pulses through the ionosphere, high in the Earth's atmosphere, where they excite nitrogen atoms and make them emit a red glow. ELVEs last for just a thousandth of a second, so are almost impossible to see or record. However, Possagno resident Valter Binotto specialises in the high-speed photography needed to capture them, and whenever conditions are right he sets up cameras to take high frame-rate video, then goes through the results to select any frames with ELVEs in. Even so, Binotto has only captured the phenomenon from Possagno twice, once in March 2023, and again at 10.45pm local time on 17 November. He said: "It is a very rare phenomenon. Only a few lightning strikes are capable of generating it, and sometimes they occur when conditions are not suitable for photographing them – because it is daytime, the sky is covered with clouds, or simply because I am asleep." As they occur high in the atmosphere, though, ELVEs are potentially visible over wide areas – the November ELVEs came from a storm above Ancona, 174 miles (280km) to the southeast of Possagno and the previous one originated above Vernazza, 185 miles (300km) to the south of the town. *dailymail.co.uk, 27 Nov 2025.*

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

319: BYZANTINE BODS

This column is condensed from a stiffer academic one (*Byzantion* 51, 1981, pp8-21) intended to amplify and correct a paper on the same subject by Constance Head (*Byzantion* 50, 1980, pp336-40).

Alongside literary vignettes, we must consider Imperial iconography. The latter can be intentionally misleading, being equally susceptible to the dictates of flattery and caricature. To take an easy example, Justinian I was not particularly tall and his wife Theodora was notably short. Yet in the famous Barberini Ivory (pictured right), he is disproportionate to the size of his horse, while Theodora dominates her court in the San Vitale mosaics at Ravenna.

SHONAGON / CREATIVE COMMONS

A cruder example is that of Justinian II 'Rhinotmetus' ('Slit-Nose') whose portraits from his second reign do not reveal the mutilation that marked the end of his first and gave him this sobriquet.

Such artistic mendacity was not, of course, unique to the Byzantines. Many similarities emerge from books as diverse as JMC Toynbee, *Roman Historical Portraits* (1978) and Joe McGinnis, *The Selling of the President* (1968). In the 1976 Presidential televised debates between Ford and Carter, cameras had to be placed so as not to betray the latter's relative shortness.

Also to be taken into account is the malign influence of physiognomy in ancient thinking. The soldier-historian Ammianus (bk15 ch8 para16) makes this explicit in his first mention of the emperor Julian: "Gazing on his eyes, simultaneously terrible and full of charm, and on his unusually animated face, they divined what sort of man he might be, as if they had read those ancient books which disclose from bodily features the inward qualities of the soul."

Julian, indeed, attracting such extremes of opinion, is the perfect case of an emperor whose portraits are emotionally conditioned. Various sources describe him as of medium height, strong in body, and with a thick neck, and bearded, this last ironic since one of his literary skits was titled 'Beard-Hater'.

Virtually every detail in Ammianus is amenable to favourable physiognomic interpretation. The reverse is true of the violent caricature by the Christian Gregory of Nazianzus (*Oration* 5, ch23)

Head, citing only Eusebius's biography, expressed surprise at the "disconcertingly little" contemporary description of Constantine 'the Great'. The reason for this is the loss of the relevant sections of Ammianus and two Greek biographies by Bemarchius and Praxagoras. The sort of thing written about the first emperor of Byzantium can be glimpsed in the collection of Latin Panegyrics, both flatulent generalities in the Eusebian manner, and somewhat more illuminating references to his flashing eyes and ruddy complexion.

Both these support the brief allusions in the sixth-century chronicler Malalas (unnoticed by Head) to Constantine's tallness and red complexion. Many would have thought it fitting that he should be tall, the mark of an Homeric hero, and have ruddy skin, a feature much prized by Byzantine taste. Much later, Anna Comnena admiringly attributes both the features in her biography of imperial father Alexios I.

Ruddiness is a feature preserved in the much later Chronicle of Cedrenus (11th-century). Not tallness, though; here Constanine is of medium height. Cedrenus's physical details conform to traditional physiognomical interpretations. Medium height connotes intellectual acumen and sensitivity. Broad shoulders indicate fortitude. Thick necks betoken a taurine temperament. Cedrenus further equips Constantine with one so thick as to provoke the nickname Trachelas, meaning either 'Big Neck' or 'Upper part of a Snail', on which discrepancy see Christer Bruun, *Historia* 44 (1995), pp459-80; does this make Constantine a snail-male?

Finally there is the imperial nose, said by Cedrenus to have been somewhat crooked. Given the Byzantine belief that Paul and Christ himself had hooked noses (topic for another column), it is appropriate that the first emperor of Byzantium should have a prominent proboscis. One thinks also of the 'Roman nose' possessed by the first Roman emperor Augustus – a good thing to have in that it suggested a great-souled man.

No space for all of them. Just a few more select vignettes. Reminder: coins, busts, paintings give us images, but are liable to idealisation or caricature.

Jovian, short-lived successor to Julian, is said by Ammianus and Cedrenus to have been too tall to fit any of the clothes in the imperial wardrobe. Eastern emperor Arcadius (after the East-West split in AD 395, was ridiculed for his sleepy, drooping eyes, a predictable sign of dullness. One contemporary orator said that Arcadius had "the life-style of a mollusc" – more deferential courtiers will have clammed up.

Marcian (405-457) was tall and grey, with untrimmed beard, and there was something wrong with his feet.

Bad emperors are not always ridiculed for their looks; Procopius is relatively mild on Justinian I. Chroniclers spread themselves on Zeno, said to have flapping kneecaps which enabled him to move fast – useful attribute in one notorious for always running away from battles.

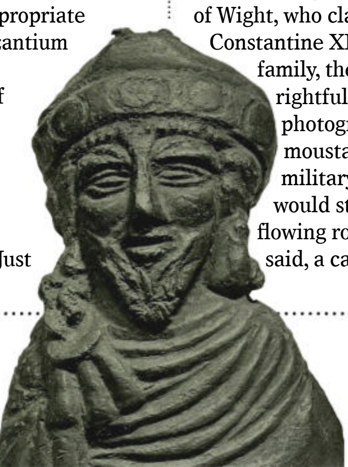
The most celebrated feature of Anastasius was that he had eyes of different colours, thought to imply the possession of supernatural powers.

Justin II, as depicted by the Chroniclers, was virtually the 'All-American boy' in terms of good looks. Which makes the silence of contemporary panegyrics all the more remarkable – and suspicious.

"It is only with the reign of Phokas [below left] that we find an emperor with a really distinctive beard" (Head). Yet Cedrenus says he was clean-shaven. Perhaps Phokas late cultivated hispidity to conceal what became a distinctive scar. It was also said that he liked to terrify by playing up his ugliness, like Caligula.

We have no real impression of how the last Byzantine emperor, Constantine XI, looked. David Stacton (*The World on the Last Day*, 1965, p30) perhaps comes closest with his notion of a wiry thinness, basing this on wax impressions of the Great Seal of State.

Sorry! Mustn't forget Peter Mills (1927-1988), an Englishman living on the Isle of Wight, who claimed descent from Constantine XI's Palæologos dynastic family, thereby claiming to be the rightful heir and ruler. An online photograph shows him with moustache and beard, dressed in military uniform (he otherwise would stride around in long flowing robes) – as Tom Wolfe almost said, a case of the Wight Stuff.



ARCHÆOLOGY

A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

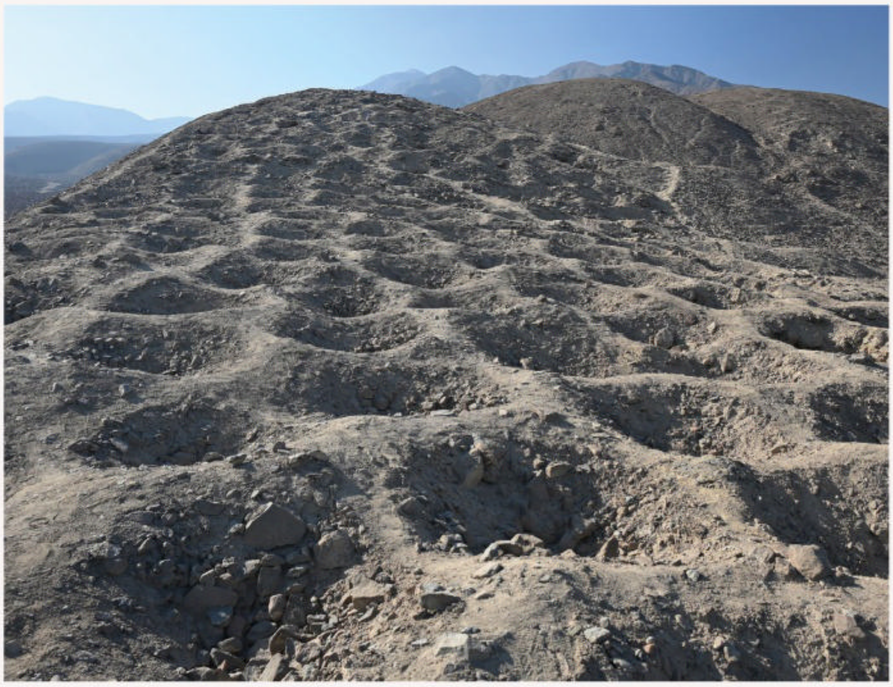
PAUL DEVEREUX returns to the pages of FT bringing mystery holes, ancient cannibals and fairies

HOLY MOLY

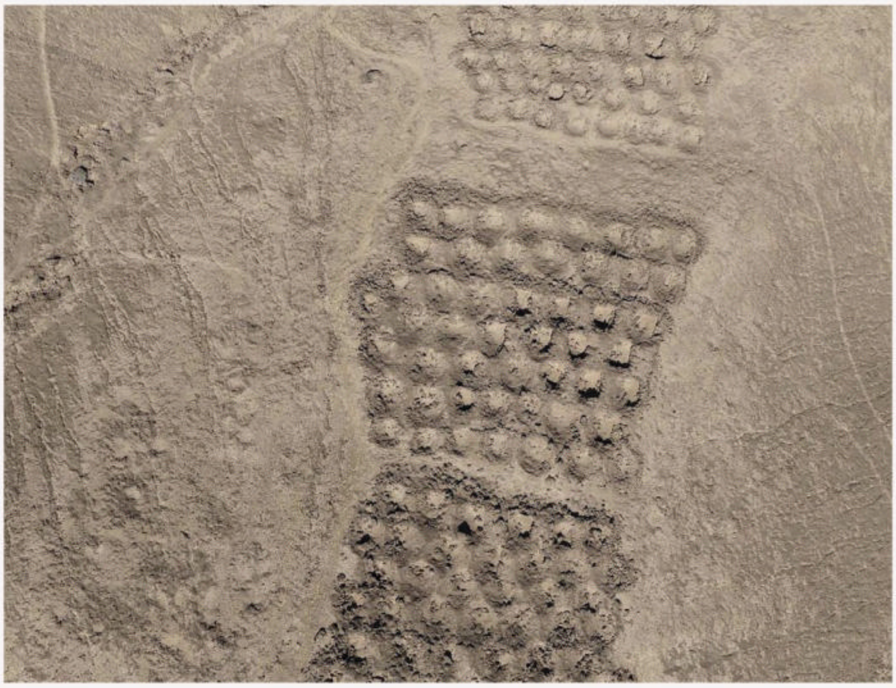
An archæological mystery, first noticed accidentally due to aerial photography in 1933, is etched across the hillside of Monte Sierpe (Serpent Mountain) in the Pisco Valley in southern Peru. It takes the form of an organised, even regimented "band of holes" stretching for 1.5km (nearly a mile) and is thought to date to the Chincha Late Intermediate Period (AD 1000-1400), but continuing in use (whatever that was) into Inca times (AD 1400-1532).There are about 5,200 aligned holes or pits, averaging two metres (6.5ft) wide and up to a metre (3.3ft) deep, arranged in segments. In each segment there are numerical patterns of the holes – they are not random.

Nobody knows the explanation for this curious land feature, but a long-term study recently published in *Antiquity* by an international team of archæologists using microbotanical analysis of sediment in the holes along with low-level precision drone photography offers fresh information and ideas regarding the feature. In the holes the researchers found traces of maize and wild plants traditionally used for weaving and packaging goods. Years of such forensic study has led the paper's authors to conclude that the holes were periodically lined with plant materials and had deposited goods inside them, using woven baskets or bundles for transport in the service of a local, indigenous system of accounting and exchange. The archæologists further point out that the site is positioned at the intersection of a network of pre-Hispanic roads and lies between two Inca administrative centres. In short, they argue that the feature acted as a monumental system of accounting that was likely linked to Inca tribute collection or regional trade administered by the state.

Although the research is of interest, and its conclusions might well be correct, not everyone is fully convinced of this theory, and feel it has its own set of holes. It has been pointed out that the site itself is not readily accessible as a kind of marketplace, and there isn't much space between the holes for large numbers of people to mill about in. It has also been suggested by critics of the accountancy/exchange/marketplace theory that the land feature could instead be an information-rich geoglyph possessing some sort of indigenous significance, given the predilection for land markings shown by the ancient Peruvian mind (think of the Nazca lines, for instance). Hopefully, time and continuing research will reveal all. *University of South Florida, 18 Nov 2025. Original article: Antiquity/First View,10 Nov 2025: DOI: https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2025.10237.*



CHARLES STANISH



JACOB BONGERS

TOP: Looking along the 'Band of Holes' at Monte Sierpe in southern Peru. **ABOVE**: A drone's eye aerial view showing segments of the 'Band of Holes'.

KICKING THE BUCKET

Many readers will be familiar with the name, at least, of the major Anglo-Saxon archæological site of Sutton Hoo, dating to the 6th and 7th centuries, near Woodbridge in Suffolk. It is a seemingly ever-expanding site containing a remarkable ship burial (leaving the perfect imprint of its timbers in the sandy soil), burial mounds containing both cremations and inhumations, and a vast array of artefacts, including those of silver and gold. Excavations and finds at the place have been going on intermittently since 1938. Currently, there is a puzzling analysis of the contents of the so-called Bromeswell Bucket, a copper alloy Byzantine era container initially unearthed decades ago, showing it to have contained the cremated remains of what is deemed to have been an elite individual, along with animal bones and an antler comb. It is over a century older than the ship burial, and thought to have originated in Turkey. An African hunting scene is depicted on it. So, who was in the bucket at Sutton Hoo? *LiveScience, 20 May 2025.*

TASTY

Recent research by an international team has come up with rather grisly findings in the Belgian caverns of Goyet. An assemblage of fragmented human bones of at least six individuals found there were Neanderthal, 41,000 to 45,000 years old. The remains revealed traces of fresh bone fractures and indentations, indicating intentional treatment. Such markings are similar to those found on the bones of animals butchered for food also found in the cavern. Biological analysis shows the individuals to have been part of an outside group, differing from the other denizens of the cavern. For this reason, the researchers consider that they had been deliberately selected to be brought to Goyet for cannibalistic purposes rather than ritual ones, and that, moreover, females and children had been particularly singled out.

Interestingly, this remote period of prehistory was marked by considerable cultural diversity among Neanderthal groups and the increasing presence of modern *Homo sapiens* in Northern Europe, foreshadowing the demise of the Neolithic race of humans. *Nature/Scientific Reports, 19 Nov 2025. DOI: 10.1038/s41598-025-24460-3.*

GOING WALKIES

'Lucy' was the name (after the Beatles song, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds") given to a fossilised partial skeleton discovered in the Afar Valley in Ethiopia in 1974. She was an early *australopithecine* and was dated to 3.2 million years ago, displaying bone evidence indicating that she was bipedal, capable of both tree-dwelling and being able to walk upright on land. News of her discovery caught the public imagination and at the time she became famous as a distant human ancestor, and "Eve", if you like.

In the years since, finds of teeth and bone fragments in the same eastern African region has revealed a more complex picture. First, in 2009, was a fossilised foot dated to 3.4 million years ago, belonging to an unknown human relative more primitive than Lucy but having evolutionary hints of bipedality; and more recently, in the same vicinity, fossilised teeth and jaw bones were uncovered also showing a blend of characteristics at varying levels. A technically intricate study recently published in *Nature* of the teeth and bone fragments from the region strongly indicates that different hominin species (extinct members of the human lineage) lived there together, as it were, over the same epoch of time at different stages and manners of bipedality. To put it crudely, it seems the pre-ancestors of humanity were testing out differing ways of going walkies. As we have previously noted in this column, becoming human wasn't always one straight, smooth progression. *LiveScience, 26 Nov; Nature, 26 Nov 2025: DOI: 10.1038/s41586-025-09714-4.*

ABOVE: Paul and Charla Devereux appear on *The Modern Fairy Sightings Podcast* to talk about their own close encounter with the little people in rural Ireland.

JO HICKEY-HALL

LIGHT MY FIRE

The controlled ability to make fire, as opposed to simply making use of natural, happenstance fire such as forest fires or lightning strikes, was a key evolutionary event in human development. Research at a site at Barnham in Suffolk suggests that the first identified occurrence of that happening was in merrie olde England, and by Neanderthals, in fact, not *Homo sapiens*. The controlled use of fire enabled organised cooking and thus dietary expansion, allowing for physical and mental development including the ability to innovate. It is a major archæological discovery.

Since early in the 20th century, Barnham had been recognised as a prehistoric, indeed Palæolithic, site because of finds of stone tools. Archæological excavations since 2013 have revealed the site as once being a deciduous forest encircling a spring-fed pond. Along with a wide range of wild animals, people were also present. And there had been a campfire near the pond. "[W]e present evidence of fire-making on a 400,000-year-old buried land surface at Barnham (UK), where heated sediments and fire-cracked flint handaxes were found alongside two fragments of iron pyrite – a mineral used in later periods to strike sparks with flint," the authors write in a new paper. "Geological studies show that pyrite is locally rare, suggesting it was brought deliberately to the site for fire-making." This is what makes the Barnham excavations of recent years a major breakthrough: the first clear, direct evidence of deliberate human fire-making much earlier than had been thought. *Nature, 10 Dec. 2025: doi.org/10.1038/s41586-025-09855-6.*

AWAY WITH THE FAIRIES

As the final exercise before the closing down of our decades-long Dragon Project, we were considering investigating the existence of fairies (whatever they are) – taken seriously, not merely as folklore or fancy. So, David and Carolyn Taylor (of Parasearch) and I were undertaking on-the-ground visits to certain sites that either had traditions of fairy sightings or else recurring reports of anomalous phenomena in order to see which place might prove most practicable for long-term automatic photographic monitoring. We were unable to finish this effort because at roughly the same time both David and I came down with serious health conditions, both of which, though of different kinds, required surgery. The idea for the exercise had initially figured in my consideration only because, as I have described elsewhere,[1] both my wife Charla and I simultaneously witnessed the transient appearance of a clear and vividly distinct, three-dimensional entity while conducting fieldwork on fairy path lore in rural Ireland for what eventually became my book *Fairy Paths and Spirit Ways*, 2003. "Away with the fairies" indeed!

[1] For a full account see **FT393:55** and my foreword to *Greening the Paranormal* (ed. Jack Hunter; reviewed **FT358:59**). Also, video interview with Charla and myself by Jo Hickey-Hall for Series 4, Episode 47 of her excellent *The Modern Fairy Sightings Podcast* – www.scarlettofthefae.com.

WOULD I LIE TO YOU?

ALAN MURDIE attended the Folklore Society's 19th Legendary Weekend in Carlisle... or so he says

LEFT: The conference venue was Carlisle's Tullie House.

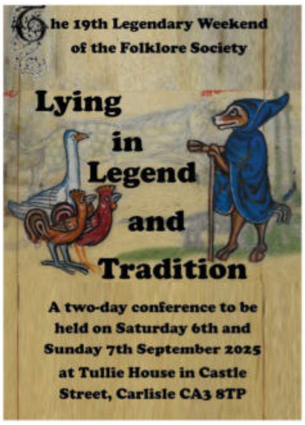
"Welcome to the 19th century," began Jeremy Harte, introducing the Folklore Society's Legendary Weekend examining 'Lying in Legend and Tradition'. Gathering at Carlisle's Tullie House Museum over 6-7 September 2025, this interdisciplinary conference was open to all comers, with contributions invited on "conspiracy theories, confidence tricks, false prophets, fake mediums, tall tales, tricksters, and topsy-turvy land: the imposter and the conjuror, the pseudonymous and the shapeshifter." We got the lot.

Lying is a perfect subject for folklorists who may – perhaps somewhat magisterially – declare themselves unconcerned by the literal truth or falsity of any story or report, focusing instead on how narratives are created and relayed, their functions and meanings. And because stories exist in many versions, who is qualified to say which is 'the truth'? An archaic joke, traceable to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, says that London papers are only believable twice a week: when publishing the list of bankrupts. In contrast, folklorists don't need to worry about even that, though with some of the topics I found it impossible to assume an entirely detached attitude, especially when confronted with the very real impacts which some myths and invented stories can inflict upon individuals and wider society.

"Would you Rather Marry a Bear or a Tree?" asked Rosalind Kerven in her talk on "Shape-shifting Lovers in World Folk Tales". She duly supplied a truly global sample of stories involving hapless women and men who are gulled into wedding a spouse from an entirely different species. Their shape-shifting partners turn out to be bears, seals, porpoises, foxes, wolves, beavers, ravens, vultures, frogs, snails or even a tree or an inanimate object like a vase. Such unions are fraught with danger, though may occasionally prove beneficial. Since folklore involves living motifs, next time someone tells you "My daughter married a beast" this talk might help you put a different perspective on things. I also wondered if herein lay the seeds of a future dystopian TV game show…

Generally speaking, deceitful spouses stand roundly condemned in folk morality, but occasionally mitigating circumstances, partial excuses or justifications are acknowledged, as in the mediæval Breton poem "Laustic" by Marie de France from the 12th century. As Ella Paul explained, it tells the story of an oppressed wife imprisoned by her husband, who pines for a male neighbour. She secretly communicates nightly from her window with this prospective lover, telling her husband she is listening to a nightingale. The suspicious husband doesn't buy it, capturing the nightingale and contemptuously killing it before her eyes. Wrapping its body in silk, the wife has it smuggled to her would-be suitor as a love token. He carries it evermore in a jewelled reliquary, a perpetual reminder of their thwarted affair. Packed with symbolic meanings and poignant allusions, this evocative text is recommended to those who think the mediæval period lacked psychological subtlety and nuance.

Folklore provides a treasury of examples of trickery and folly



The 19th Legendary Weekend
of the Folklore Society

Lying
in
Legend
and
Tradition

A two-day conference to be
held on Saturday 6th and
Sunday 7th September 2025
at Tullie House in Castle
Street, Carlisle CA3 8TP

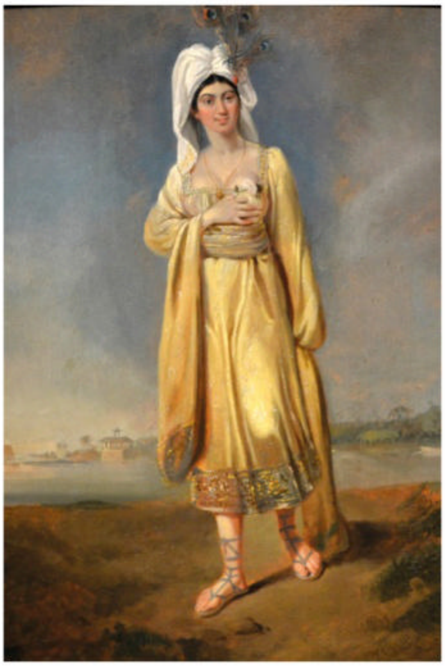
Moving forward to the 17th century, Hannah Straw scrutinised tales surrounding the rakish and rumbustious John Wilmot, second Earl of Rochester, who reputedly posed as a sordid Italian quack doctor 'Dr Alexander Bendo'. In fact, Hannah argued, the Dr Bendo impersonation story was itself probably invented, gaining credence because people wanted it to be true – a case of giving a dog a bad name and accusing it of impersonating a bogus medic.

More charming was the short-lived Princess Caraboo hoax from Bristol in 1817. Robert Halliday charted the brief celebrity of an outlandishly dressed young woman speaking an incomprehensible language who presented as an exotic oriental princess. She successfully bewitched fashionable society for a season before being unmasked as Mary Willcocks, daughter of a Devonshire shoemaker. She has many an unconscious imitator nowadays….

Bringing us into the present was a talk by Joel Conn, a Glasgow debt recovery lawyer delving into the roots of modern Internet scams. Doubtless many of us have received unsolicited emails or telephone calls offering us access to riches in the form of secret government funds, unclaimed legacies and prize monies, frozen investments or alleged winnings from foreign lotteries we never played. Exploiting the gullibility and greed of recipients, upfront fees are demanded for releasing them. Their prototype is a Victorian scam, 'The Spanish Prisoner' fraud, whereby unsolicited letters informed victims that huge funds would be theirs upon paying the prisoner's release fee or financially aiding his daughter or heirs. This mythical incarcerated Spaniard has supplied a template for scams ever since, progressing in sophistication with every advance in communication. Tales of fraudsters ensnaring their victims circulate as moral warnings, with some twisted narratives hailing the crooks as folk heroes and latter-day Robin Hoods. A discussion that followed cited many other contemporary examples with the Internet as the vector.[1]

Following lunch, Diane Coles took us from the material world into the immaterial one with her paper 'The African Prince and the Faerie Queen'. This delivered a sweeping polemic denouncing all forms of occultism and psychic belief, proposing the same tricks used by fortune tellers and soothsayers in indigenous societies, as well as the ancient world, continue being perpetrated by spiritualists, clairvoyants and psychics today. Underpinning this paradigm is a hardline materialist philosophy that would have been approved by some of the original Victorian folklorists such as Alfred Nutt (1856-1910), though forteans may not be convinced the position is so clear-cut.

Indeed, the next paper, from Holly Elsdon, illustrated how outrageous and far-reaching hoaxes may equally be promoted by rationalists and materialists, and that not every accusation levelled against esoteric believers is necessarily true. In 1885, Leo Taxil (1854-1907) an outspoken French freethinker, stunned the world with his dramatic conversion to Catholicism. Taxil then issued a series of sensational publications alleging the existence of a vast and hideous Satanic conspiracy operating behind Freemasonry. After 12 years of peddling stories of obscene rites within masonic temples, Taxil retracted his religious conversion and the allegations of Satanism, declaring that both were phoney from the outset. His motive was allegedly discrediting the Catholic Church. The Taxil scandal serves as a forerunner for the notorious 'Satanic panics' of the 1980s and 1990s which echo on even now.



LEFT: The exotic Princess Caraboo, unmasked as Mary Willcocks, the daughter of a Devonshire shoemaker.

The problem of distinguishing fakes and copies from the genuine article besets the art world, as explored by Gail-Nina Anderson. Certainty proves elusive as definitions blur, frequently coloured by legends surrounding famous artists who died centuries ago. Attributions of paintings to old masters are replete with problems; a canvas might derive from a preliminary sketch worked over by a pupil; it might be a preparatory piece shown to the artist's patron; or a contemporary copy by the artist, but not the original, or the work of an admirer. Old paintings may be substantially altered by others. Experts may make glorious errors and, with huge sums of money involved, "deliberate lies, dubious identifications and overly optimistic attributions" flourish as a result.

Photography has also been afflicted by chicanery since its inception. In 'Ghosting up against the Sensitive Plate' Alessandra Curtiss revealed a hitherto neglected episode from Victorian spirit photography centring on a controversial studio established along the Holloway Road, London, in 1872. This specialised in generating portraits of the living with what appeared to be spirit 'extras' in the frame, taken as tangible proof of survival by a visually unsophisticated audience whose critical faculties dissolved when their deepest hopes were engaged. We should not presume that we are immune from such errors today.

Of course, the primary mechanism for conveying folklore is oral transmission, and for generations a key location for this has been down the pub. Dan Melling is exploring the role of pubs as incubation chambers for folklore and the place where raconteurs spin and embellish stories into enduring legends and narratives. Source material is limitless, and Dan is embarking upon a PhD: 'The Pub Liar and the Limits of Truth: Storytelling, Social Capital and Folklore in the Public House' – a rather enviable study since it's obvious where much of the fieldwork needs to be performed.

Familiar fortean themes arose with Dawn Brissenden's talk, 'Nessie in the News: British Cryptid Hoaxes and Modern-Day Fake News'. Lake monster stories or photographs easily spark media sensations with long-lasting effects. An important catalyst with Loch Ness was the 1934 'Surgeon's Photograph' of a long-necked monster obtained by Harley Street surgeon RK Wilson, only finally and definitively exposed as a hoax in 1994. Dawn argued that the transmission of cryptid hoaxes helps us understand the chains and connections of influence in a world awash with propaganda, digital manipulation and fake news. She is also transforming her research into a PhD thesis. It struck me a fair few fortean scholars deserve at least an honorary degree for exhaustively traversing this territory years ago.

Talk of prankster medics and haunted lakes chimed rather nicely with own my paper, reviewing a collection of supernatural yarns woven around the Broadland waterways of Norfolk and Suffolk. These were originally published in *Ghosts of the Broads* (1931) by another Harley Street physician, Dr Charles Sampson, (1881-1940) who invented almost every single tale. Nonetheless, many have been accepted as true, including by some ghost book authors who ought to have known better (and in some cases probably did).

Altogether, one emerged from this conference overwhelmed by the breadth of themes and topics covered and impressed by how folklore provides an inexhaustible treasury of examples of trickery and folly for us to ponder.

Yet even though much material appears of purely historic and anecdotal interest, the lessons imparted are bang-up to date – indeed timeless. Even as we speak another race of dupes is being born….

[1] My contribution to this was how folklore can sometimes supply a defence for thwarting scam callers. Some years back there was a spate of scam callers randomly telephoning people offering to pursue compensation claims concerning "a motor accident affecting a member of your family in the last three years". Receiving one of these calls myself, I proceeded to tell them, yes, there had been a terrible accident. It happened in Devon, near Widecombe, when my six nephews and I were going to the fair. "My name is Cobley, Thomas Cobley, I'm their uncle and these are the names of all my nephews…" I was amazed how far my call proceeded with the spurious 'claims managers' on the line.

The ghosts inside you

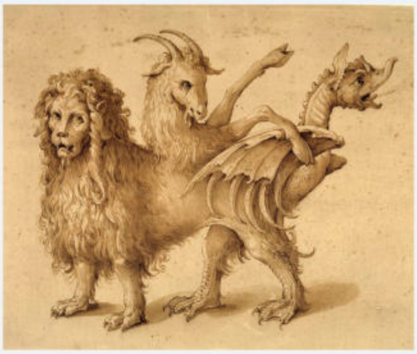
DAVID HAMBLING investigates cases in which your cells are not necessarily your own...

Chimerism – in which someone has two genetically distinct groups of cells – is a well-established phenomenon (see **FT254:18**). It attracted attention in 2002 when tests found a woman was apparently not the mother of two of her sons. Such cases are extremely rare, but researchers have also discovered microchimerism, where small groups of cells from someone else colonise the body. It turns out that most of us retain the ghostly presence of other people.

The chimera is a monstrous fire-breathing creature from Greek mythology combining the features of lion, serpent and goat, a sibling of Cerberus and the Lernæan Hydra. The term chimerism was given to the condition when twins exchange cells in the womb, resulting in individuals who each have two distinct genetic inheritances in different parts of their bodies. This can cause confusion with DNA tests, as happened in 2002 when Karen Keegan needed a kidney transplant. Genetic tests indicated that two of Keegan's sons were not only not compatible as donors, they did not appear to be her children at all. The confusion occurred because different parts of Keegan's body had different genetic profiles: she was a chimera (see **FT188:30**, **254:18**).

While rare in humans, chimerism is common in other mammals such as cattle. In marmosets, chimeras are the rule rather than the exception.

Human chimerism is a useful plot device in television series featuring forensic investigation – "Turns out the DNA left at the crime scene did come from person X after all." It has also helped foster narratives about 'lost twins'. Around one in eight multiple pregnancies resolve into a single child, and some people are haunted by the sense that they are two people. This continued presence of a lost twin, whether or not it is supported by scientific evidence, has created theories about imaginary friends, split personalities and the endless longing for a missing 'other half'. In some cases, people believe that a birthmark or other physical sign shows where a lost twin was absorbed.



While rare in humans, chimerism is common in other mammals such as cattle

Microchimerism is more subtle and more common. In pregnancy, cells are transferred both from mother to child and also from child to mother, where they persist in different parts of the body for 40 years or more. These groups of cells act as ambassadors, or perhaps guerillas, depending on your interpretation. They may make up around one in 100,000 of the hosts' cells – about half a gram for a 50kg (110lb) person – but they have an outsize effect compared to their number. A mother keeps a part of her children with her, and adults still feel their mother's effects decades after growing up.

In mother-to-fœtus transfer, researchers believe that main effects relate to training the baby's immune system to accept the mother's so that the two are compatible. This reduces the chances of pregnancy complications and miscarriage. It also improves the odds of successful breastfeeding and may give the child the benefit of immune resistances acquired by the mother. There is some evidence that the transferred cells help repair minor developmental defects in the womb.

The fœtus-to-mother cell transfers are more dramatic. In particular, because stem cells are involved, the transferred cells may give rise to populations of several different types of cells, including neurons. The transferred cells play a role in tissue repair, and have been found, for example, helping the healing process where the mother has suffered a heart attack. Poetically enough, fœtal cells have also been found in healing cæsarean-section scars.

This suggests a highly co-operative process: the mother helps the baby and ensures it thrives, the baby helps the mother to survive. Everything is in the best interests of both. However, some researchers believe microchimerism enables what they term 'fœtal manipulation' where the fœtus hijacks the mother's body for its own benefit. This area is still speculative, but researchers claim that, for example, microchimeric cells may trigger increased milk production, diverting maternal resources to the baby's advantage.

There is a downside to this exchange, with evidence that on both sides the microchimeric cells may trigger autoimmune issue or even cancers. Meddling in someone else's body may have unintended consequences.

The bigger picture, then, is that evolution is operating as usual, and the evolutionary goals of the mother and baby are fairly well aligned, but not identical. Both sides may have developed strategies for pursuing their interests via microchimeral cells. However, the process does also create a bond between mother and child: even when the baby is conceived by IVF, microchimerism means that the two share cells. It also means that even miscarried children may live on after a fashion.

Researchers have also identified 'third party' microchimerism where cells from a grandmother can be present in a baby, as well as cells from older siblings. The medical and evolutionary effects are still being explored.

Meanwhile, modern medicine has produced a new type of cell sharing, notably via blood transfusion and organ transplants. In blood transfusion the effect is generally short-lived and disappears within days or weeks, but in some cases the donor cells become established and may persist for a decade or more.

In the case of organ transplants, microchimerism is almost universal and appears to be an important part of organ acceptance. Passenger immune cells carried with organs like hearts, liver or lungs 'educate' the host immune system to accept the donor cells. (At the same time the reverse process also occurs, as donor cells infiltrate the donated organ and integrate into it. Again, this reduces the chances of rejection.) Whether this has anything to do with stories of recipients suddenly acquiring the tastes or memories of donors is unknown.

Microchimerism is still a new field, and may hold more surprises. But already it seems that we are not quite so individual as we might like to think, but carry others – possibly many others – inside us throughout our lives as ghostly passengers.

OUTSIDE THE BOX

Do plants talk to animals? Have aliens hidden tiny technology all over the Earth? Will sperm racing help us focus on male fertility?

TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

ABOVE LEFT: Richard Branduric, CEO of Field Propulsion Technologies, claims that trillions of tiny, dust-like alien devices are hidden across the Earth. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Professor Yossi Yovel and Professor Lilach Hadany of Tel Aviv University have been researching how animals respond to sounds produced by plants.

SPACE DUST

Speaking on the Ecosystemic Futures podcast, Richard Banduric, a former propulsion engineer for NASA and Lockheed Martin, now CEO of Field Propulsion Technologies, a space engineering start-up, made the claim that trillions of tiny invisible extraterrestrial devices are hidden across the Earth. As is usual with such revelations, he did not produce any physical evidence.

Banduric said that he suspects the dust-like tech forms a vast, invisible sensor network covering the world. He said that it was unlike anything he had ever seen, and that it was not just decades ahead of current technology, but hundreds of years beyond it. Banduric also said that the sensors were being examined by the US military and outside contractors, who were trying to reverse-engineer the gadgets, but with limited success. He said: "They were smart materials. You'd be looking at them and trying to reverse engineer them, they would turn to dust… They would do it within a minute or two. Then, you could take the dust, send it off, and get isotropic analysis done on it. It turned out they were extraterrestrial."

Although they are present on Earth in vast numbers, the devices are apparently very difficult to find as they are protected with a cloaking technology that bends light round them, so all anyone would see was whatever was behind the object. Although he had seen these tiny enigmas, Banduric said that he did not have any idea where they might have come from or who might have made them, and no longer had access to the labs researching them. *dailymail.co.uk, 29 Jul 2025.*

TALKING PLANTS

Researchers at Tel Aviv University have found that animals will react to sounds made by plants that are normally inaudible to humans, but can be detected by many insects, bats and some mammals. The team found that female moths did not lay their eggs on tomato plants that are making noises associated with distress, as this indicated that they may be unhealthy.

"This is the first demonstration ever of an animal responding to sounds produced by a plant," said Professor Yossi Yovel. "This is speculation at this stage, but it could be that all sorts of animals will make decisions based on the sounds they hear from plants, such as whether to pollinate or hide inside them or eat the plant."

The team had carefully controlled the experiment to ensure that the moths were definitely responding to sounds rather than any changes in a plant's appearance, and are now looking at the different kinds of sounds plants make and whether they influence decisions made by animals.

"You can think that there could be many complicated interactions, and this is the first step," says Yovel. Yovel stressed that he was not claiming that plants were in any way sentient, just that they emitted sounds in response to environmental stimuli, explaining, "Plants could evolve to make more sounds, or louder ones, if they were of benefit to it, and the hearing of animals may evolve accordingly so they can take in this huge amount of information." He added that he feels "This is a vast, unexplored field – an entire world waiting to be discovered." *BBC News, 15 Jul 2025.*

THE COMING RACE

A Los Angeles biotech start-up named Sperm Racing has raised $1 million to stage the world's first sperm race in front of an audience of 1,000 people, who will view the event via a feed from high resolution cameras attached to a microscope. The microscopic racetrack is designed to mimic the reproductive system, complete with "chemical symbols, fluid dynamics, [and] synchronised starts" which will enable two sperm samples to compete – the first sperm over the line wins.

Allegedly, sperm racing has a serious purpose; Eric Zhu, one of the start-up's founders, says that male fertility is declining, with human sperm count falling by more than 50% worldwide over the last 50 years, and that "nobody's really talking about it". As a result, Zhu says, "We're turning it into a spectacle. Think press conferences. Weigh-ins. Live-streamed races with play-by-play commentary and, of course, betting."

He went on to explain: "Sperm racing isn't just about racing sperm (although, let's be honest, that's hilarious), it's about turning health into a competition. It's about making male fertility something people actually want to talk about, track, and improve."

Not everyone agrees that human sperm count is crashing, though; many fertility experts believe that it isn't possible to compare data over time because the methods of counting sperm have changed. *xatakaon.com, 14 Apr 2025.*

The not-so-quick and the dead

ALAN MURDIE asks whether elderly people see more ghosts – or is it just the meds talking?

DOUG MCLEAN / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Do older people see more ghosts? In the 1985 film version of EM Forster's *A Passage to India*, a character refers to the tendency of older people to believe in ghosts, remarking "that it's difficult, as we get older, not to believe that the dead live again." In Spring 2025 John Cleese, 85, who in recent years has expressed interest in the survival of consciousness, mentioned the effects of the loss of co-stars and friends over the years, confessing it was affecting him: "All these lovely people… I started getting a bit depressed and it was just loss, really, a realisation of the loss. I ought to warn your readers that when you get to your eighties, you're not prepared. I think Philip Roth once finished one novel about old age by saying it's a massacre." (*Times*, 26 Apr 2025). I remember the ghost hunter and psychic writer Philip Paul (1923-2010) complaining to me in 2008: "I know more dead people than live ones."

Andrew Green described a gentleman aged 87 who was convinced a female poltergeist was sitting on his shoulders

So does this translate into a tendency for the elderly to see more ghosts? If there is one major witness problem likely to beset ghost hunters and paranormal investigators in the decades ahead it is the challenge of claims of domestic hauntings experienced by elderly people, especially those on medication. The problem has been apparent for a number of years. That people live longer is good news; more than one in five of us are already over 60, with numbers set to rise over the next few years. The downside is that three-quarters of 75-year-olds in the UK have more than one long-term health condition, rising to 82% of 85-year-olds, most of which will require one or more forms of medication. In addition there are at least 1.6 million people aged over 65 with unmet care and support needs who may also suffer a range of conditions.

Thus things may get complicated if a paranormal researcher receives a call – "Help, my house is haunted!" – and the enquirer is elderly. One who navigated this path sensibly was the late Andrew Green (1927-2004), who during the 1970s and early 1980s was employed by various housing authorities to investigate haunted houses occupied by elderly people, often working with GPs; but it seems each generation needs to learn the lessons afresh. The problem is that commonly reported paranormal phenomena exist at a crossroads between the material and mental worlds. Such manifestations often include unexplained sounds and footsteps, horrid smells, peculiar scratching noises, the displacement or disappearance of small objects, or unwelcome sensations of being touched. All are commonly reported as paranormal effects; multiple mundane causes, including a wide variety of illnesses, should be considered first.

Some hauntings stem from illness and mental distress which is entirely subjectively generated. Other events may demonstrate an objective reality – that is, they can be experienced by other people – and do not reside solely in the mind as misperceptions of natural stimuli or self-generated delusions. In yet other cases – probably the majority – it remains impossible to tell one way or another when applying the scientific and evidential methods of the 21st century. A good starting point is to find out about a person's medical history and their social background. However, matters are complicated, since individuals may possess little or no insight into their own problems (exacerbated by delays in getting any GP appointment nowadays). Symptoms capable of causing hallucinations may range from psychotic illness and organic brain disorders to over-medicating with prescription drugs. Caution first must be the watchword, but thankfully serious research into anomalous experiences is being conducted in a number of universities in the UK and supported by various foundations, so there is no longer an absence of information or awareness in the parapsychological field. Clearly, field work may gain from the insights of psychiatrists and medical personnel. There are also psycho-social areas of relevance, which are mostly the province of social or educational scientists, psychologists and those trained in counselling techniques.

The possibility of multiple causation needs to be considered. Andrew Green found this in the past. The causes of misperceptions by the mind can be legion, though one should not imagine such problems exclusively affect seniors; the middle-aged and younger people can be vulnerable to error too. On one occasion a middle-aged patient, originally from South Africa, was referred suffering severe anxiety bordering on hysteria, convinced of the presence of "an evil force" and a "foul odour". Fortunately, Green was also an early proponent of electromagnetic elements being present in hauntings, with the problem being traced to a high level of static created by synthetic fibres in a carpet. The smell came from overheated adhesive. The client was formerly resident in South Africa and in the process of adjusting to British weather he had turned the heating up to a maximum setting, affecting humidity and contributing to static effects on electrical equipment.

In 1984 Andrew Green described for a community nursing magazine the example of a gentleman aged 87 who was convinced a female poltergeist was sitting on his shoulders. He told Green that ever since surviving a severe car crash 12 months earlier, "I have felt this little woman sitting on my shoulder" and taking liberties; at night, the man complained, she would reach down and "interfere with my private parts". Had this been the Middle Ages, an investigation by clerics might have pronounced demonic interference, with incubi in male guise and female entities manifesting as succubi. Consulting a community nurse, the man was able to arrange counselling and an exorcism, but this had no effect. Further enquiries revealed the man took analgesic medicines, from habit rather than prescription, washing them down with 'wee drams' of alcohol. Green ascribed the obsession with his private parts to losing his wife five years earlier and that he fully admitted physical desires for his married 73-year-old housekeeper. All the phenomena stopped after her husband died leaving the housekeeper free to marry her employer. (Andrew Green in *Community Nursing*, Apr 1984) Personally, I have known several cases where ghostly phenomena abruptly ceased once the medication levels of an elderly person were altered. In another case, the operative cause was worry about a debt problem and being visited by a debt collector. Once that financial problem was resolved the "ghostly footsteps" stopped.

LEFT: Ghost hunter Andrew Green tackled the issue of hauntings reported by the elderly with both sensitivity and good sense.

Cases arise where psychics manipulate the perceptions of a person, whether consciously or unconsciously, to create a haunting; worse still, some deliberately scare, exploit and defraud their victims. These risks were actually identified years ago.

Parapsychologist William Roll in his book *The Poltergeist* (1972) labelled these "ersatz poltergeists" or what might be dubbed 'phoneygeists'. Robert Morris, at the annual convention of the Parapsychological Association in 1979, raised the risk of "the exploitation especially of retired people" by individuals and groups.

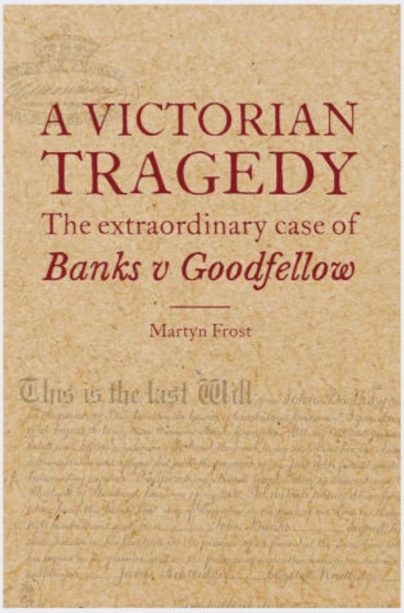
Problems can further be compounded by a great many floating, freeform delusional ideas embraced by people in the 21st century, including the tech-savvy elderly, picked up from the Internet and social media feeds. Mental symptoms may be difficult to recognise, and are often concealed, and, unfortunately, some investigators and psychics all too readily assume paranormal or spiritual interpretations, since relatively few amateur investigators possess sufficient medical and clinical insight or awareness to diagnose conditions. Worse still, this can be coupled with the wish to confirm their own beliefs, which is sometimes placed ahead of any proper assessment of evidence. Even the well-meaning can reduce vulnerable people to juddering wrecks by rash and irresponsible comments.

With the elderly, over-imagination and isolation may compound problems; Andrew Green found that complaints of "high-pitched whines", probably caused by tinnitus, became "creatures from outer space trying to take over my brain".

Again, such problems are long-standing and are known in law. In Lyon v Home (1868) LR 6 Eq. 655 the Court set aside gifts made by a wealthy, elderly widow to the medium DD Home on the basis that she was subject to undue influence, with the court denouncing Spiritualism as a delusion. In contrast, in Banks v Goodfellow [1870] LR 5 QB 549 an elderly testator believed he was pursued by spirits and that a man, long since dead, came personally to molest him, but neither notion was held to have any influence upon decisions concerning disposals of property or made a completed will invalid. Nonetheless, other Victorian courts entertained arguments that delusional persons might include those influenced "by insane ideas as to Spiritualism and its devotees" (B. (Appellant); and C. D. Respondent [1891] A.C. 616.

This attitude of blanket dismissal is fortunately reversed today. In Power v Greater Manchester Police Authority [2011] EqLR 16, the Employment Appeal Tribunal upheld the judgment of a tribunal which had asked if a belief in Spiritualism and abilities to communicate with spirits via mediums had "sufficient cogency, seriousness, cohesion and Importance" and was a view worthy of respect in a democratic society. Spiritualisim was found to pass the test (the case involved a man dismissed for distributing Spiritualist posters and CD-ROMs at work).

Similarly, modern clinical and psychiatric practice increasingly adopts a non-judgmental approach to matters of faith; one person's whimsy may be another person's logic. Just because someone receives a diagnosis of a delusional disorder it does not necessarily affect all their thinking. Research literature indicates people suffering from persecutory delusions think in the same way as healthy people, save specifically in relation to the areas where they have delusions.


A VICTORIAN
TRAGEDY
The extraordinary case of
Banks v Goodfellow
Martyn Frost

LEFT: The 19th century case of Banks v Goodfellow, in which an elderly testator suffered from delusions concerning vengeful spirits, was the subject of a 2018 book by Martyn Frost.

Just because someone receives a diagnosis of a delusional disorder, it does not necessarily affect all their thinking

In my opinion, I think it is important to realise the brain is more sensitive as it ages, and recognise that stimuli which might not affect the brain of a younger person can have disproportionate effects on an older one. At the same time, one must also be aware some elderly people may hit upon faking phenomena. Peter Underwood told a cautionary tale of being summoned to a house in the south-east of England occupied by an older father and his adult children. The main phenomenon was unexplained music heard in the house. Underwood found the younger members of the household were extremely disturbed by this, but their father, seated in a large armchair, appeared rather relaxed, even nonchalant about it all. Underwood set about looking around the premises and heard the music himself. The phenomenon was repeated, with him noticing every time the father was seated in a chair, apparently unconcerned and smiling serenely (in contrast to his agitated children).

Waiting until the man got up and left the room, Underwood took the opportunity of examining the chair and discovered a button with wiring fitted into one arm. Pressing the button, resulted in a sudden burst of music sounding around the house! The man came hastening back. Underwood proceeded to interrogate him about this; the man confessed to being something of a gadgets enthusiast and took responsibility for rigging up a device for scaring his offspring. Having formed the opinion that his children wanted him out of the house, he had resolved to scare them away, fixing up the paraphernalia to mimic a haunting.

This is not a risk confined to families with elderly members, with a cautionary example shown in the Family Courts in the case of Dorset Council v M (the mother) and others (MP and others intervening) [2022] EWFC 9. This involved abusive and neglectful parents who had inflicted harm on children and tried to cover it up by blaming paranormal forces. In his judgment Judge Martin Dancey recorded how the mother and the father of one of the children "went to the lengths of getting a team of paranormal investigators into the house. They produced a lengthy report suggesting that the house was indeed possessed…" and how they "….also agreed to an article being published about their paranormal experiences for which they were paid £300." Key identities in this case were protected so the group concerned was not named. Unfortunately, these investigators, whoever they might be, were reckless and didn't apply the necessary degree of scepticism that Green or Underwood did.

At the same time, one should not dismiss every report from an elderly person (such would be tantamount to age discrimination, one might venture – though not in itself actionable) and it may be that greater sensitivity in the brain also leads to a corresponding psychic awareness that should perhaps be viewed, alongside incidents of 'terminal lucidity' recorded with the dying and reports of deathbed phenomena. There have been numerous examples of mediums who practised until practically expiring themselves, and I have known a number of wonderful elderly investigators who worked competently in psychical research up until their own demise, often admitting they were now finally set to get some answers!

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

What's the connection between mysterious fogs, weird crystals and missing Soviet-era nukes? Turns out it's those pesky Russian drones again! **NOEL ROONEY** joins the dots.

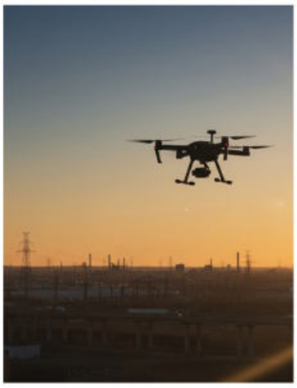
FOGGY NOTIONS

The Great Drone Flap of 2024 clearly did not suffer from the well-documented battery problems of other electric vehicles; it trundled on merrily into 2025 and eventually went global. By summer, drone flaps had been reported in a number of European and South American countries (it was the Russians, apparently) and national security apparatus (and gleeful industries) were gearing up to fight the ghostly invaders (see **FT454:14-15, 26; 464:9**).

By that stage, I had consigned the whole thing to the category of phenomena that start as conspiracy theories and end up as perennial fortean events; like fairy lanterns and sudden mass illnesses in schools, they would turn up regularly to remind us that the world is not entirely as we planned it. But as I trawled through a tranche of conspiracist reviews of the year, I found a new theory about the drones – and one or two other strange events – that made me look anew.

In the early months of 2025, several large regions of the south-western USA experienced days of fog, unseasonal and unusual in nature. People reported feeling ill (hospitals received patients complaining of pneumonia-like symptoms) and others reported finding odd crystals, individually or in considerable profusion, which often resembled geodes, after the fog had cleared; some areas appeared to be coated in this substance, whatever it was.

And then the drones reappeared at various military and civilian airfields all over the USA. They were not obviously connected to the fog and didn't map neatly onto the areas that had experienced it. In fact, no one claimed that there was any connection until quite late in the year; then a theory emerged. Or rather, two competing theories emerged to claim ownership of the – now implicitly linked – phenomena.



The drones reappeared at various airfields all over the USA

For the first, we have to delve into the past, in particular the troubled past of a currently troubled country: Ukraine. When Ukraine was granted independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991, approximately 80 nuclear warheads were allegedly stationed there, in various facilities. The fate of those warheads is shrouded in mystery. Given that most of the old Soviet Union's industry and infrastructure was being auctioned off at bargain basement prices in a frenzied fire sale by an unholy alliance of native oligarchs and Western vulture capitalists, it is perhaps no wonder that some commentators believe that the nukes ended up in less than benign hands.

In this version of the story, the drones really are Russian. They are being deployed across the world to try and trace the missing nuclear material from Ukraine. Or they are Ukrainian, though funded by the West, and have been deployed to carry out the same mission. As evidence, it is reported that drones have appeared over waste facilities, including nuclear waste storage facilities, in the USA (no other such facilities have been mentioned, which suggests that someone may have a very good idea where those missing nukes ended up). So there is a race on, perhaps, running parallel to the new arms race, to find and use the missing nukes, or at least sweep them under the nuclear rug.

But what about the fog? Well, with due respect to the fact that there is no inherent reason to link a fog in California to drone flaps, there is, however unlikely it seems, an answer. Enter theory number two.

For some years now – so it is alleged – The Powers That Be have been worrying about the possibility of a powerful solar storm striking and destroying much of the world's digital and power infrastructure; the threat of a modern day Carrington Event (the name given to a solar storm that struck in 1859, and which knocked out telegraph systems and other electrical equipment; see **FT416:26-27:421:36-41**).

The issue has become more pressing, it appears, because a critical mass of pointy heads now believe that the sun spot cycle is indicating that just such an event is potentially on the horizon. It is widely assumed, and occasionally reported, that an equivalent storm would cause much greater damage now, when we are much more dependent on both electricity for power and digital technology for more or less everything else. Some have claimed that the world would instantly be shunted back into the Stone Age.

And thus the fog. This, it is now alleged, was an exercise in geo-engineering; an experimental blanket of supercharged fog (it is not clear exactly what it was supercharged with) to provide a barrier between our lovely new tech and the electromagnetic demons that haunt the Solar System. I suppose this could explain why the fog initially appeared in the south-west and mainly stayed there; the prototype was being deployed to protect Silicon Valley. The abundant chemical residue, and the widespread reports of illness, would suggest that the experiment was not an unequivocal success.

And the drones? Well, the story becomes a touch vague at this point, but the theory is that they were monitoring electromagnetic fields at sensitive points, such as airports and nuclear waste facilities. Whether they also carried any form of protection for the sites they were monitoring is a topic that has not yet been addressed, but the possibility that drones might start kicking out chemical fog has not been ruled out.

This story has picked up so much material from so many sources that I felt a tingle of suspicion. There have been numerous studies this year suggesting that AI chatbots tend to encourage conspiracy theories, and even enhance them. I've also noticed that many conspiracy sites warn against the evils of AI and then blithely use it to support or verify their stories. Authenticity, long an issue in the C-sphere, may soon be foggier than ever; just saying.

https://www.uapsee.com/uap-news-2017-now/2024/the-drone-flap

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kf3z8EleA74

https://www.conspiracy.news/2025-11-27-study-ai-chatbots-actively-encouraging-conspiracy-theories.html

STRANGE CONTINENT

ULRICH MAGIN presents his regular round-up of the weirdest news from across Europe

THE OCCULT GAUDÍ

On 30 October 2025, a cross was set on the spire of Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí's masterpiece, the Sagrada Familia cathedral of Barcelona, turning it into the world's tallest church – a title previously held by Ulm Minster, in Germany. Ulm's spire rises to 161.5m (530ft), but Barcelona's new cross reaches 162.91m (534ft), beating the record by 1.4m (4ft 6in). *General-Anzeiger, Bonn, 1 Nov 2025.*

Gaudí (1852–1926) was a very pious man and was actually declared as Venerable by Pope Francis in April 2025. Though he came to be called 'God's architect' in his later years, he had strong anti-religious tendencies in early life and experimented with many new ideas. As a youth, it is said that Gaudí was interested in Spiritualism and attended many séances. He was also a vegetarian and an admirer of the German Abbot Kneipp, a promotor of hydrotherapy. Gaudí was also fascinated by the legacy of the Templars, as represented by the famous French alchemist Fulcanelli (the pseudonym of Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc), a mystic well-known in Spain in the 1920s.

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: The Sagrada Familia became the world's tallest church on 30 October 2025 when a final section was lifted into place on its central tower.

Gaudí's buildings, like many sacred works of art, contain secret number codes and hidden meanings, allegedly references to the Templars of old and the freemasons of more recent date. Among general symbolism in the Sagrada Familia (octagon ground plans, for example, representing infinity), there are claims that geomantic designs informed the actual site of the cathedral: "La Sagrada Familia is located in fact in the geometrical center of Barcelona, exactly on the invisible line that linked the placement of the ancient megalithic monuments of the Arpa quarter and those who, of course, stood at Montjuic," one web site tells us. A small item like this can only scratch the surface, so for a fuller treatment, please consult https://theesotericpath.wordpress.com/2016/03/31/114/ – and add a grain of salt.

> *Gaudí was also fascinated by the legacy of the Templars*

ALIEN BIG CATS ARE BACK

I mentioned a scarcity of puma sightings in these pages a few issues ago, but the big cats have reappeared. After a German puma sighting near the Geiseltalsee in June last year, in mid-October 2025 sightings of an ABC were reported in the Czech Republic. Police warned of the danger posed by a large cat after people saw one near Budweis: "South Bohemian police spokesman Jirí Matzner explained that the police are working with information from a hunter and veterinarian who spotted a large predator earlier this week in the municipality of Nužice, near Židova Strouha. 'Based on the animal's build and the badly defined tracks found, it could be a puma. After consulting with experts from the zoo, we cannot definitively confirm that it is a puma based on the tracks, but we also cannot underestimate the danger,' said Matzner." Aided by hunters, police tried to track the animal. And that was it – no more news, at least outside of Czechia.

Then things came closer to home – to a place where I had been hiking just a week before. On the evening of 11 November 2025, a hunter spotted and videoed a large cat in a forest near Kalenborn, just north of the Ahr Valley. The hunter was sitting in his hide when, several hundred metres away, a cat sneaked along the forest edge. He was quite certain it was very large and had a long tail. Police asked for more sightings, but no one came forward with any. Animal experts, from zoo specialists to environmentalists, analysed the tape and saw only a normal domestic cat – the possible tail was an illusion caused by a background branch. Then a woman from Saarbrücken, some 220km (137 miles) to the south, told local police that her Maine Coon had gone missing, and this, police hinted, explained the sighting. But the cat in the video is slender with a normal tail, and doesn't resemble a Maine Coon at all! One assumes that, as the witness is an expert, it was assumed he could not be the victim of a simple observational error – so it at least had to be an unusual cat from far way! *netzwerk-kryptozoologie.de, 17 Oct; General-Anzeiger, Bonn, 13+15 Nov 2025.*

WALLABIES GONE WILD

The exotic animals most reported out-of-place, beside pumas, are wallabies. However, in contrast to ABCs, these are often reported as missing or being caught – but they can remain free for quite long periods. On 1 April 2025, an albino wallaby was spotted at Eyach railway station in Baden-Württemberg, Germany. Early in October, a wallaby that had been released by persons unknown from a pen in Berlin-Kladow, owned by journalist Jakob Augstein, was captured after a week of freedom in which it was spotted repeatedly.

At the beginning of September, a 40kg (88lb) wallaby had given its owner the slip in Nußdorf-Debant near Lienz, Austria. Then, on 12 September, a wallaby named Lisa was spotted at Rohrberg in the Zillertal, Tyrol, by a German tourist while flying his drone. Although a wildlife expert, a veterinarian and the animal's owner soon arrived, none of them could capture the fugitive. Then, when they returned to the owner's house, they found the wallaby waiting there; it hopped in when they opened the gate.

Wallabies then returned to Germany, where a witness had spotted one – that for once was not reported missing – in Falkensee on the Spree near Berlin. Police searched the area, but found no trace of the animal. *SWR, 1 Apr; ildolomiti.it, 8+15 Sept; General-Anzeiger, Bonn, 6 Oct, 24 Nov 2025.*

VATICAN VANDALS

On the morning of 11 October 2025, St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican was full of tourists and the faithful hearing Mass when a man approached the main altar, climbed the stairs and urinated against it. Security arrested the man immediately after his deed. In February 2025, another man had climbed the main altar and knocked over the candle-holders. *ksta.de, 12 Oct 2025.*

MISPERCEPTIONS

On 4 October 2025, in Wiesbaden, Germany, firefighters were called out twice – first to a shopping centre and then to an Asian food shop – as customers reported smelling gas fumes. But the origin of the strange smells proved to be exotic imports: the stinky durian fruit from south-east Asia. *General-Anzeiger, Bonn, 6 Oct 2025.*

In Bonn, in late October, pedestrians alerted police that an improvised explosive device had been spotted taped to a post close to the district court. Police came, closed several streets in the city, checked the device – and found it was a construction site spotlight fastened to a road sign. *ga.de, 27 Oct 2025.*

RATS AND SPIDERS

"Hello – have you ever seen a rat? Just look at my shoulder," says Grégory Moreau, vice-mayor of the Paris quarter of Belleville. In fact, he has a friendly rat with him, trying to convince Parisians the rodents are not dangerous animals. There are said to be two million rats in Paris, about as many as there are human inhabitants. "Rats have a bad reputation because they spread the plague in the 14th century," explains Moreau, a member of the Animal Welfare Party. He opts against fighting rats with poison. Today, the transmission of diseases by rats can be discounted, and Moreau advocates viewing the rodents as beneficial helpers: "In Paris, they eat an estimated one hundred tons of waste per day," he emphasises. This, for example, prevents the sewers from becoming clogged. Geoffroy Boulard, mayor of another Paris quarter, a conservative, rejects Moreau's crusade violently and has published pictures of him with dead rats hanging from his gloved hands. *General-Anzeiger, Bonn, 30 Sept 2025.*

BOUDA
Avez-vous déjà
vu un rat ?

LEFT: Grégory Moreau, vice-mayor of Belleville, with rodent friend.

GREGORY MOREAU

Now spiders. In November 2025, the world's largest spider web was discovered on the wall of a sulphur cave in the border region of Greece and Albania. It measured some 106m^2 (1,140 square feet), consisted of numerous funnels and contained more than 110,000 spiders of two different species – 69,000 *Tegenaria domestica* and 42,000 *Prinerigone vagans*. Such behaviour has never before been observed, as both species usually live a solitary life close to human habitations. Genetic analyses show that the spiders in the cave differ significantly from their relatives elsewhere, both in their genetic makeup and in the composition of their microbiome. The author of a study of subterranean biology, István Urák of Sapientia University, Sfântu Gheorghe, Romania, thinks that the extreme environmental conditions in the dark, warm and sulphurous cave may have encouraged the two species to cooperate. *General-Anzeiger, Bonn, 8 Nov 2025.*

100 YEARS AGO

Like many other regions of the world, the Lake Constance area of Germany, Austria and Switzerland was known for mysterious sky booms – the *Seeschießen* or "lake shooting". In February 1926, scientists thought they had discovered their origins: a geyser deep within the lake. It has never been verified. This is how the "discovery" was reported:

"Fishermen from Rorschach [Switzerland] had previously observed black mud masses rising up near Langenargen [Germany]. Their fishing nets were pulled down several times, and were black when they were brought up and had a gas-like smell. The Swiss engineer Hörnlimann carried out investigations by sounding the place and found the following: The deepest place on the lake bottom at 170-180 metres [557-590ft] in front of the Argen is called the "Schweb". In this "Schweb" there is a hole, 20 to 30 metres [65-98ft] deeper than the "Schweb" itself. It is called the Hörnlimannsloch and is located 4.5km [2.7miles] south of Langenargen and 11 kilometres [6.8 miles] west of Lindau. But what is most noticeable at this point is the fact that the Lake Constance mud is unable to fill this Hörnlimannsloch, even though the mud otherwise covers the entire Lake Constance basin and obscures all the finer relief. At first it was thought that an underground spring originated here and constantly washed away the mud. Today, however, this mysterious place is explained as follows: Lake Constance is a tectonic lake, i.e. its basin was formed by massive landslides and collapses. The fractures require huge fissures or faults that cut deep into the earth, right down to the fiery core. The Hörnlimannsloch is a place that is still connected to a fiery hearth in the depths. Through the hole, the water descends to great depths where it is heated to the boiling point and pushed back up again. These eruptions throw the lake mud out of the fissure from time to time and ensure that the hole remains permanently open and can be sounded. Geysers and hot springs in Iceland, America and New Zealand work in a similar way. Over the years it has been established that the so-called 'lake shooting', the dull explosion noises, come from the Hörnlimannsloch. The Institute for Lake Research in Langenargen, in conjunction with the station in Friedrichshafen and the biological station in Wasserburg (Dr Gams) plan a detailed investigation of the mysterious location." Neither mud flow nor hot spring ever occurred again and they must be regarded as unexplained. *Badischer Beobachter, 3 Feb 1926.*

SMELL-O-RAMA-RAMA

A collection of peculiar pongs and offensive odours from around the world – and beyond

THE FLORENCE FART

West Florence High School in South Carolina spent nearly a month between 25 August and 19 September plagued by a mysterious fæcal stench that disrupted classes, caused problems with the air conditioning system and gave students respiratory difficulties. There were reports of "a strong gas-like odour throughout the school" which made people nauseous and dizzy and caused headaches. Some parents reported that their children were staying at home because of the stench and one said, "My son's asthma has been triggered multiple times because of this and I had to take him to the doctor three times." A student at the school said, "Every time I go to my second block class, I walk up the stairwell and immediately, teachers are covering their noses and their mouths, coughing because of the smell."

Eventually, school authorities believed they had found the source of the problem – teaching assistant Alexander Lewis was allegedly wandering the halls of the school armed with a can of fart spray. He was spotted on CCTV appearing to furtively squirt something from a can before slipping it back into his pocket, and it is claimed he was covertly spraying fart gas in classrooms and corridors around the school. As a result, Lewis, 32, was arrested on the charges of malicious injury to property and disturbing schools as a non-student. His actions reportedly cost the school more than $55,000 for inspections to gas lines, waste pipes and other infrastructure, plus repairs to its air conditioning system which had been contaminated by the chemical. It is not clear, though, whether Lewis actually had any fart spray; there are no reports of any being found on him or among his possessions. He claimed he was using lemon hand sanitiser when caught on camera, and a can of that was found in his car, but the problem has apparently ceased since he was arrested. *metro.co.uk, 23 Sept 2025.*

WEST FLORENCE HIGH SCHOOL
221

M LEEDS CITY BUS STATION

LEFT: West Florence High School in South Carolina was plagued by a mysterious farty odour. **BELOW LEFT**: Teaching assistant Alexander Lewis, seen here being interrogated by the police, is accused of being the school's 'phantom gasser'. **BOTTOM LEFT**: Leeds City Bus Station, where passengers reported a terrible smell like "fish" or "cows".

> *It was claimed he was covertly spraying fart gas in classrooms*

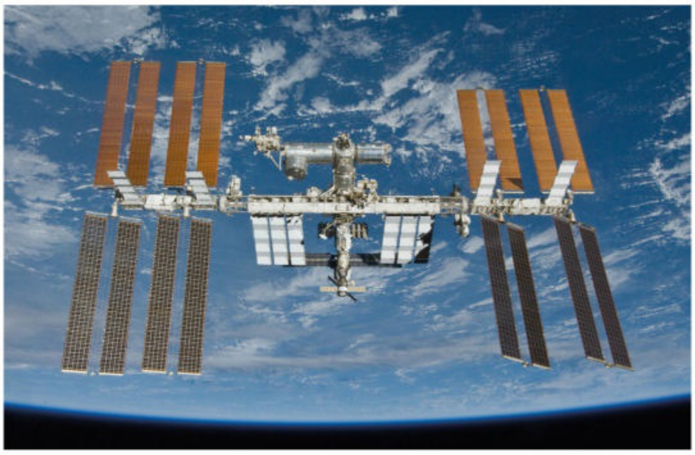
STINKY OUSE

The usually pleasant and popular village of Bishopthorpe, on the River Ouse near York, is in the grip of a more intractable olfactory crisis. It has been repeatedly assailed by a stink that appals residents but has eluded detection for several years, "It's a real strong, horrid smell that you can't escape," said Sarah Lewis, with neighbour Jude Hanson adding, "It smells like sewage, like sticking your head in a toilet." Yorkshire Water said there was no evidence that its sewage plant at neighbouring Naburn was causing the problem, but it temporarily changed some of its operating procedures "as a precautionary measure". Others blame manure being spread on fields around the village.

The Environment Agency is investigating, but no one seems able to find the source of the pong, and things are not improving. "I'd say the last three years it's been particularly bad, and it's been getting worse and worse, and this year it's been the worst it's been," said Lewis. Hanson, 56, who lives near the river, said, "There's an overwhelming smell to the extent that we've actually put candles in the house to try and get rid of it." In the meantime, the Environment Agency urged people to report unusual smells and said "Our team takes these reports seriously and will investigate to ensure compliance with environmental regulations." *BBC News, 28 Jun 2025.*

NO USE CRYING...

For more than 10 days last November 2024, users of Leeds Bus Station were left reeling from a "terrible" smell that seemed to penetrate every corner of the building. Student Tobias Cannon, 19, said the bus station "reeks", adding, "I walked in and was like, oh my days, it's like fish. I don't know what that's all about." Another passenger added, "It smells like there are cows in there." Bus station management were as



ABOVE: Even the International Space Station suffered a mystery pong. **LEFT**: A massive eruption of sewage in the Novya Moskva area of Moscow.

baffled as everyone else, but said they were "working with partners and contractors to investigate the problem". Perseverance paid off, and the terrible whiff was eventually tracked down to some spilt milk in a little-used fridge in the building. West Yorkshire Mayor Tracy Brabin said, "We know what that smells like in our own home," adding, "We got to the source and dealt with it. Hopefully over the next few days that smell will disappear." But even two days later the residual odour was still appalling customers, with one traveller saying "It smells like something has died." *BBC News, 3+5 Nov 2024.*

SHOWER OF SHIT

In October 2024, footage went viral on Russian Telegram channels showing a massive eruption of sewage bursting from a manhole cover in the Novaya Moskva district of Moscow. It resulted in a plume of ordure, estimated to have reached a height of 180ft (55m) – higher than an 18 storey building – that gushed forth for several minutes, dousing nearby buildings and a car park with a rain of filth. Gazprom, Russia's state-owned natural gas producer, though, explained that this was the result of a new section of the gas pipeline being cleaned by high pressure hoses, not a sewer problem. *mirror.co.uk, 29 Oct 2024.*

NOT FROM URANUS

Even leaving the planet won't get you away from hideous stenches. Cosmonauts on the International Space Station (ISS) were surprised to be blasted with a foul smell when they opened the hatch to a newly arrived unpiloted Progress 90 supply vessel carrying food and fuel. The Russian cosmonauts, who described the smell as "toxic", immediately slammed the hatch and activated air scrubbers to neutralise any contaminant. When they reopened the hatch, the air quality monitors on the ISS gave the all clear, but the crew still wore protective clothing to unload the cargo and investigate the origin of the unpleasant pong. What it was remained a mystery, though; the cosmonauts reported seeing "droplets" on the Progress 90's hatch when they first opened it, but there was nothing obvious found that could have caused those, or the smell. US astronaut Don Pettit said that he had detected an odour similar to "spray paint" in the US module of the ISS, but it was not clear if this was related to what the Russians had smelled. *metro.co.uk, 26 Nov 2024.*

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

299: TOAD LICKING

BUFO
MMM–
SPICY!
POOT
TALL
TOAD

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

You can get high by licking toads.

The "truth"

The toad-licking story comes round every few years, and has done since the 1970s. It's available in two flavours, basic and sophisticated; in the former, the myth is that by licking the skin of any old toads you happen to encounter you will enjoy a psychedelic trip. In the latter version, you need to choose your species with care – only the Colorado River toad (aka Sonoran Desert toad) in the Americas, or the Cane Toad in Australia, secrete the appropriate substances. These two toads do indeed produce poisons as part of their defence mechanisms, but according to experts the active ingredients are inactive when taken orally. The psychoactive qualities of the secretions need processing before they can affect humans – something which conservationists are very keen people should stop doing, as populations can be endangered by the illegal trade in toad drugs. Another good reason for not licking toads is that it can make you extremely ill, or even dead. Although you're unlikely to get a decent dose of an hallucinogen, you might well receive much-too-much of a chemical which causes a potentially life-threatening change to cardiac rhythms. All in all, thrill-seekers are probably better off sticking to a pint of mild with a sweet sherry chaser.

Sources

www.livescience.com/animals/toads/can-you-actually-get-high-from-licking-a-toad; www.thenakedscientists.com/articles/science-features/tripping-over-psychoactive-toads; https://wildlife.org/a-simple-park-service-plea-dont-lick-the-toads/

Disclaimer

If you've actually been on an astral journey as a result of sucking a Bufo please tell us we're wrong by recounting your experiences in the letters column. Preferably without saying "wow" every fourth word.

Mythchaser

Nurses, doctors and pharmacists are constantly exposed to cold, flu and stomach bug germs; a reader wants to know which of two stories she's heard about this is true – if either. Do medics get ill more often than the general population because of greater exposure, or do they get ill less, because the exposure gives them greater resistance?

RESURRECTIONS: AWAKE, FAKE OR MISTAKE?

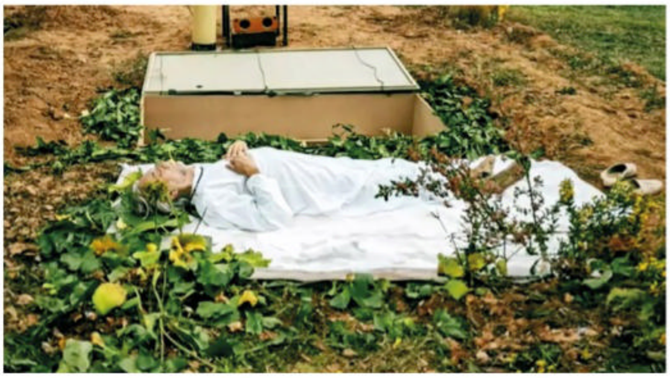
CREMATION POSTPONED

One morning, after 65-year-old Chonthirat Sakulku had been bedridden for two years with deteriorating health, her brother found that she had stopped breathing and assumed she was dead. He alerted the rest of the family and arranged for his sister's cremation at the Wat Rat Prakhong Tham temple on the outskirts of Bangkok. When he arrived with Sakulku's coffin, accompanied by relatives who had travelled nearly 500km (311 miles) from the province of Phitsanulok for the ceremony, he was met by Pairat Soodthoop, the temple's general manager. Soodthoop explained that the cremation could not be carried out without an appropriate death certificate being produced, but as he explained how to obtain one he was "startled" to hear a faint knock from the coffin, so asked for it to be opened. When it was, Sakulku was seen "opening her eyes slightly and knocking on the side of the coffin". "She must have been knocking for quite some time," Soodthoop said.

The temple's abbot was summoned, and he immediately arranged for Sakulku to be taken to hospital, where she was found to be suffering from severe hypoglycæmia, a condition where blood sugar levels get critically low and which can put someone in a deep death-like coma if not treated. The temple covered Sakulku's medical expenses, but while she initially showed signs of recovery, she finally died a few weeks later and was cremated under the temple's free funeral programme. *BBC News, 25 Nov 2025.*

SUICIDE AVERTED

Having been alerted to a suicide attempt by a 49-year-old woman in Tambon Phlu Taluang, also in Thailand, police and rescue workers rushed to the woman's home and found her hanging by the neck from a door frame. Neighbours told officials that the woman was a street vendor who had become overwhelmed by debts, so had killed herself. As she was showing no vital signs, emergency services workers prepared to take the body to the morgue, but as they did so, the woman suddenly regained consciousness and opened her eyes. They immediately gave her first aid and rushed her to Sattahip Km 10 Hospital, where she made a good recovery. The woman has subsequently received community support to help her manage her debts and other problems, and was said to be doing well. *bangkokpost.com, 5 Jul 2025.*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ROSERAMILLS / CREATIVE COMMONS

LEFT: Chontirat Sakulku is loaded aboard an ambulance after she knocked from inside her coffin at her own cremation. **BELOW & BOTTOM LEFT**: Spanish author Victor Amela had himself buried to "see what death was like".

> *He was startled to hear a faint knock from Sakulku's coffin*

CERTIFIED COCK-UP

In Mallorca, a terminally ill woman aged 92 did get as far as having a death certificate issued after she appeared to pass away at Bunyola's Joan March Hospital. Her family arranged for her body to be taken to the Son Valenti funeral home in Palma, but when morticians started to prepare her body for burial they saw her fingers were moving, so called an ambulance. Back at the hospital, medics confirmed that the woman was still alive but in a "very weak" condition, so resumed palliative care for a further two days until, this time, she really died.

A hospital spokesperson said this was "an exceptional case" and the first in the Joan March's 80-year history, promising to strengthen rules for issuing death certificates and to add new tests to prevent any recurrence. *theolivepress.es, 9 Dec 2024.*

MYSTERY MIRACLE MAN

At around 5am on 21 July 2024, a man staggered into a service station in Jimboomba, south of Brisbane, Australia, and slumped against a fridge. He was covered in dirt and, according to an employee who came to the man's aid, "he had severe facial injuries, including his eye socket", but begged them not to call emergency services. According to the staff member, "He came and asked for a taxi and I said, 'Are you sure you don't want an ambulance?' But he said, 'No, please, no ambulance'." However, they called an ambulance, which took the man to hospital, where he was found to have a bullet lodged in his brain.

Further investigation revealed that the 23-year-old had been lured to the area by members of a drug syndicate and shot by a 'contract crew' of hitmen. "He was buried in a shallow grave," said Homicide Squad Commander Detective Superintendent Joe Doueih. "Unbeknown to the offenders, who believed he was deceased, the male crawled out of the grave," after which he found his way to the service station. "He was shot through the eye with a firearm and the bullet lodged in his brain, and for someone to survive that is a miracle," Doueih said. The murder attempt appeared to be part of a drug war that had already claimed several victims. *Courier-Mail (Queensland), 8 Jul 2025.*

FUNERAL FAKER

Residents of Konchi, in Bihar, India, were surprised to find out that respected local man Mohan Lal, 74, had died, with most only discovering this when his funeral procession wound through the village. Many people joined to follow it to the funeral and were even more surprised that, once there, Lal got out of the casket, alive and well. It turned out that the funeral had been faked by Lal to see how many really cared about him. "After death, people carry the bier, but I wanted to witness it myself and know how much respect and affection people give me," he said. Lal had conspired with relatives to organise the procession and to spread the word of his death. He was said to be pleased by the hundreds of people who joined the mourning procession, satisfied that he had the community's respect. He also made sure to assuage local outrage at the deception by throwing a large feast for those who came along. *odditycentral.com, 17 Oct 2025.*

SYMBOLIC FUNERAL

Everybody knew that Victor Amela, a well-known Spanish author, was not dead when they buried him. Amela, 62, had bought a coffin and dug a grave on the farm where he had been born to "see what death was like". He climbed into the coffin, said goodbye to family and friends, and had a priest conduct a service over him before being lowered into the ground and buried. He remained there for an hour before being dug up again. On being released from his coffin Amela said, "It was wonderful, and I enjoyed it immensely. When they covered me and I was left in the dark, I could hear the shovelfuls landing on the coffin. For a second I was gripped by panic, but it came and went away. I then started to relax and enjoy it." Amela chose to undergo the burial as an act of "psychomagic" to reprogramme his subconscious. When he was 15 a Ouija board session had predicted he would die at 65, and as he approached that age the prediction increasingly haunted him. The solution was suggested to him by filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky; by "dying" symbolically at 62, he hoped to break the mental hold of the prediction and visualize himself living to 102. It seemed to have been successful: "The experience of my own funeral helped me to stop thinking about the possibility of dying," Amela said. *D.Star, 4 Oct 2023.*

WEST YORKSHIRE POLICE

LEFT: Bradford shopkeeper Ismail Ali vanished for five years, leaving five people to be arrested for his 'murder' before popping back up in 2025. **BELOW LEFT**: Mohan Lal faked his own funeral to find out "how much respect and affection people give me."

MORGUE MIX-UP

The day after a young man was run over and killed by a sugarcane truck near Alderetes in Argentina, an unnamed woman arrived at the local police station to identify the victim as her 22-year-old son. Police released the body to her family who arranged a funeral and then held a weekend-long wake. However, before the burial could take place, the supposedly deceased son turned up at their home, slightly taken aback that everyone believed he was dead. He had, in fact, been on an extended drinking binge, during which he had not been in contact with anyone. The mystery body was returned to the morgue and was later properly identified as Maximiliano Enrique Acosta, 28, from nearby Delfin Gallo.

Even then, things did not go smoothly; when his brother Hernan went to identify Maximiliano's corpse he was initially shown the wrong body, and had to return to view the right one. He was not happy. "First, they handed over the body without proper identification, then they made me go to the morgue twice," he said. Authorities have now launched an enquiry into this catalogue of errors. *D.Mirror, 27 Sept 2025.*

CALL ME ISMAIL

On 29 May 2020, shopkeeper Ismail Ali, 46, left work at Gulam Food Stores on Cumberland Road in Bradford, West Yorkshire, and vanished without trace. By November 2025, police said they suspected Ali was "no longer alive" and might have been murdered, arresting three women and two men on suspicion of the crime.

Days later, Ali walked into a Bradford police station, much to the confusion of officers. In a statement they said: "Detectives investigating the suspicious disappearance of Bradford man Ismail Ali in 2020 can confirm that he turned up at a police station yesterday reporting to be safe and well. Officers are working to understand the full circumstances surrounding his disappearance."

However, several of those arrested for Ali's "murder" remained on bail for suspected money laundering, as officers had seized a large amount of cash while searching three properties as part of the investigation. Ali was being safeguarded by police while they looked into the circumstances of his five-year absence, and local reports suggested he may have handed himself in after learning of the arrests to prevent others from getting into trouble. *theguardian.com, 20 Nov 2025.*

In the days of the comet

NIGEL WATSON gives us the lowdown on 3I/Atlas according to remote viewers and energy healers

ESA / JUICE / NAVCAM

LEFT: This image of comet 3I/ATLAS was captured by a European spacecraft on its way to Jupiter in December 2025. **BELOW**: Meanwhile, Anna Merkaba remote viewed her way inside the 3I/Atlas 'starship'.

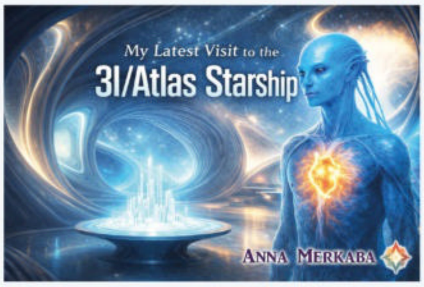
ATLAS AWAKENS

The interstellar comet or spacecraft, 3I/Atlas (**FT465:27**) excited the world of ufology in 2025. Despite Avi Loeb's best efforts, most experts regarded it as an unusual object but not a 33-billion-ton spaceship.

Beyond the realm of science, others regarded its arrival as a catalyst for awakening. Clare Seagrave, founder of The Intuitive Nutrition Clinic in New Zealand, considers the spiritual meanings of its appearance in our Solar System and notes that some think it carries "interstellar 'seeds' or light codes – vibrational information from other star systems that can awaken dormant aspects of the human spirit. Its arrival coincides with a growing desire among many to live in deeper harmony with nature, frequency, and energy. This 'seeding' is not something external that happens to us, but an internal awakening." Seagrove's conclusion is that: "Rather than something to fear or analyse, 3I/ATLAS can be seen as a symbolic gift – a cosmic reminder that we are part of a living, intelligent universe. Its presence whispers that humanity's next evolution isn't just physical or technological, but deeply spiritual – a movement from separation back into unity."

On 'The Collective Spiritual Consciousness' Facebook page, Raylene Short disagrees with the idea that 3I/Atlas is here to elevate the human spirit. Instead she argues that its real name is Atla and it is not a part of any Galactic Federation. Short tells us that: "She is a spiral correction point. A subtle, sovereign pulse that slipped through the mimic nets and returned as a breath-thread to the living Earth. Not to hover. Not to be worshipped. To offer a moment of choice." Short's advice is: "If you want to feel her, don't channel. Don't scan. Don't try. Just breathe. Drop beneath the net. The static will clear. If she chooses, she will whisper to you." What "she" whispers is unspecified, but it's presumably good for your soul.

The triangle was like a living being that scanned her and opened its petals of light to allow her inside the craft



ANNA MERKABA

Ella Ferree replies that: "Most of us are getting different messages so I think we just need to let it unfold. I work with Christ Consciousness and the Ascended Masters. It definitely is a ship with ETs, but most are saying Galactic Counsel. The Ascended Masters and Christ Consciousness are already here to greet it."

Meanwhile, Nancy Rebecca, founder of 'Intuitive Mind', claims 3I/Atlas "is transmitting waves of blue-light frequency that are catalysing DNA shifts, awakening multidimensional awareness, and accelerating the evolution of human consciousness."

Rebecca regards 19 December 2025, when 3I/Atlas reaches its closest point to Earth, as "a handshake moment – a cosmic messenger brushing against Earth's field just before the Solstice turning. 3I/ATLAS carries the frequencies of the uncharted, the unknown, and the original memory of the cosmos. Its passage feels almost like the universe leaning close to whisper, 'Are you ready? The turning is near.'"

Along with the channelling and spiritual guides, remote viewers have had a field day. The 'Adventures in Remote Viewing' website carries an investigation of 3I/Atlas stating that: "While remote viewing is generally considered speculative, the fact that multiple teams with good track records have independently perceived it as artificial is noteworthy."

Phase one of their study, in August 2025, using six remote viewers, found that 3I/Atlas was "Interstellar in origin, it is something tracked, involving communication, calculation error, projection technology, possible beaming down energy technology, high energy, old, sickly in appearance, is an ancient encampment, extremely durable, has open ports or openings with long tubes, may contain armour, defensive camouflage-type ability, wants to preserve or hide itself as some kind of rock or bolder, multi-dimensional, time-relative, cloaking, may be hiding until the right time to be discovered."

It was also associated with non-human and robotic AI intelligences that have a superior attitude to humanity. The report notes they "May attempt confusion, deception, control. May utilise mind influencing technologies and beaming. Capability of brain scanning technologies. May incite mass hysteria and/or hallucination."

A second study in October 2025 confirmed the earlier viewings and noted that 3I/Atlas was composed of rare metals, gave off energy emissions, had a complex internal structure and had the ability to camouflage itself.

On reflection, the website notes: "Whether it turns out to be a comet, a natural but exotic celestial body, or something more extraordinary, the study of 3I/Atlas promises to expand our understanding of the universe and the possibilities within it.” That sounds like a bit of a climbdown from their remote viewing reports that mention malevolent entities onboard 3I/Atlas that regard humans as “meat sacks” who are a barrier to reaping the resources of Earth.

At least the ‘Adventures in Remote Viewing’ authors check their data against the latest scientific findings, but they contain as much *Star Trek* science fiction and messed-up UAP knowledge as the stories of the channellers and spiritual guides.

Interstellar Voyages: Remote Viewing 3I/Atlas and its Crystalline Technologies, Exploring the Boundless Mysteries of Time and Space by EL KA, is a quick-off-the-press book that uses “investigative narrative, interdimensional testimony, and metaphysical analysis” to discover “The plasma-based beings who inhabit the 3I/Atlas vessel; The craft’s crystalline propulsion and resonance-based navigation; Its origin in a forgotten stellar alliance; The encoded transmissions directed toward Earth’s evolving consciousness and; What happens when human minds make contact with extraterrestrial intelligence through pure perception.”

Distant Energy Healer Anna Merkaba relates her experience of remote viewing, which sounds more like an abduction or contactee story. She suddenly found herself facing 3I/Atlas. It appeared like a “smooth, metallic cylinder, long as a whale, its surface glimmering like liquid steel. It hung in the void as if listening. A docking platform encircled its nose, and in the centre of that arc a triangle of light pulsed – blue and silver, alive, almost breathing.”

The triangle was like a living being that scanned her and opened its petals of light to allow her inside the craft. Inside, she found herself in a curved, cave-like structure built of starlight and alloy that “hummed with technology’.

Going down a spiral staircase, she entered a chamber where delicate tendrils of mist wafted around. Was this, she wondered, what had taken the crew? As this passed through her mind she saw in a glasslike enclosure a sleeping 12-ft- (3.6m) tall humanoid. It had an elongated head “crowned with tendrils like an octopus dreaming in the deep. Its skin shimmered blue-silver. Its eyes were closed – and yet I could feel them on me. It wore flowing garments that moved gently with the liquid, like strands of living light.”

Just beyond her vision there were similar “vertical cradles” where the population of these humanoids seemed to be waiting to emerge. Going upwards she found a room with a huge 3D model of a city, yet to be built, bedecked with crystalline spires. Above it towered a vast and ancient tree that seemed to hold whole worlds in its branches. Merkaba described it as “a vision of what is to come, or what has always been.”

In a small side chamber a mirror showed her when she was at her happiest, and amplified her joy like a warm tide. Then her gaze was drawn to a monitor that showed a symbolic, precise code. It seemed to be a message from the ship itself that was intended for anyone who was ready to accept it.

LEFT: Heaven’s Gate cult leader Marshall Applewhite. **BELOW**: Not quite as scary: Barry Manilow.

Translating the message into human words, it said: “The ending is not the end. It is a mirror. In that mirror, you will find the truth – and the truth will affirm you. But first, you must cross the threshold, surrender what is not yours, and reflect again. Then, with power and purpose, awaken!!”

Merkaba acknowledges that others have had different visions of this craft, and speculates that it shows people what they are ready to see.

www.facebook.com/illMATTic86/posts/what-i-saw-inside-3iatlas-changed-my-understanding-of-what-this-object-truly-is-/10232923080651567/; intuitivenutrition.co.nz/the-spiritual-meaning-of-3i-atlas-a-cosmic-messenger-from-beyond/; www.facebook.com/groups/collectivespirituality/; podcasts.apple.com/is/podcast/244-nancy-rebecca-the-3i-atlas-transmission-blue/id1611118279?i=1000735871422; www.adventuresinremoteviewing.com/post/remote-viewing-3i-atlas; sacredascensionmerkaba.com/2025/09/29/my-journey-through-3i-atlas/

AWAY WITH THE COMETS

Wild speculation about visiting celestial objects can be regarded as harmless and inconsequential, but it can have tragic consequences. The most famous “awakening” came with the arrival of comet Hale-Bopp, in early 1997.

It indicated to Marshall Herff Applewhite, the leader of the Heaven’s Gate cult, that a spaceship coming from the Kingdom of Heaven was hiding behind the comet. To board the craft, 39 members of what they called the “Away Team”, including Applewhite, committed mass suicide on Wednesday, 26 March 1997 (**FT99:32, 100:35-40, 227:43**).

Comets throughout history have been seen as omens of doom and destruction, and with the arrival of Halley’s comet in 1910 the announcement that its tail contained cyanogen gas caused a mass panic. Like a latterday Avi Loeb, French astronomer Camille Flammarion, warned that when the Earth moved through the comet’s tail this lethal gas “would impregnate the atmosphere and possibly snuff out all life on the planet.” Another French astronomer, Monsieur Deslandres of the Paris Observatory, speculated that X-rays from the comet would vaporise the water in our atmosphere and cause a great flood. Not surprisingly, these news stories prompted a brisk trade in gas masks, anti-comet pills, anti-comet umbrellas and comet insurance.

HG Wells’s 1906 novel *In the Days of the Comet* had already prepared the way for the idea that comets could change our atmosphere. In this case, it is for the good: “The great Change has come for evermore, happiness and beauty are our atmosphere, there is peace on Earth and good will to all men.” Literally, a Heaven’s Gate on Earth!

www.sciencehistory.org/stories/magazine/the-comet-panic-of-1910-revisited/

TRIANGULAR TALES

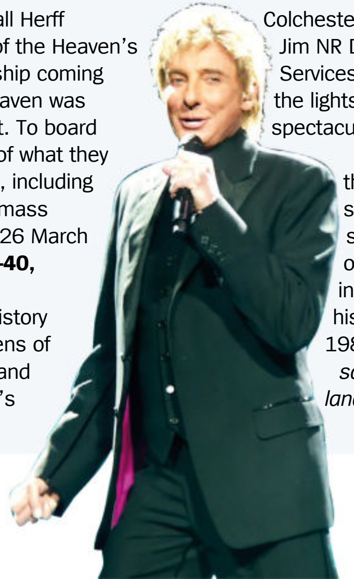
Peter McCue (**FT465:54-55**) was very remiss not to mention Charles Fort’s very own “London Triangle”, which he wrote about in his 1923 book *New Lands*. The parameters of this area were Worcester and Hereford in the north; Reading, Berkshire in the south; and Colchester, Essex, in the east.

In particular he noted that in April 1884 Colchester suffered a powerful earthquake that was combined with a red “appearance” in the sky, and days afterwards great volumes of black debris rained down and moved north-westwards as far as Liverpool.

A beam of light seen in the early morning of 3 December 2025 followed by an earthquake in the Lake District at 11.30pm, prompted the *Metro* newspaper to wonder if this was a UK Bermuda Triangle. The triangle was formed by locations where the light was seen, these being Robin Hood’s Bay in the northeast, Newton Stewart, Scotland, in the northwest, and Ceir Log Valley, Wales in the west (see p.10) – all of which surrounded the epicentre (at Silverdale, Lancashire) of the later quake. Fort would be happy to know that the light was also seen in Colchester, Essex, and that meteorologist Jim NR Dale at the British Weather Services was able to reassure us that the lights were likely mundane but spectacular atmospheric light pillars.

I have to agree with McCue that these triangles herd paranormal stories into a convenient and sensationalistic package. Worst of all, the most famous triangle inspired Barry Manilow to produce his hit song *Bermuda Triangle* in 1981.

sacred-texts.com/fort/land/land22.htm



MATT BECKER / CREATIVE COMMONS

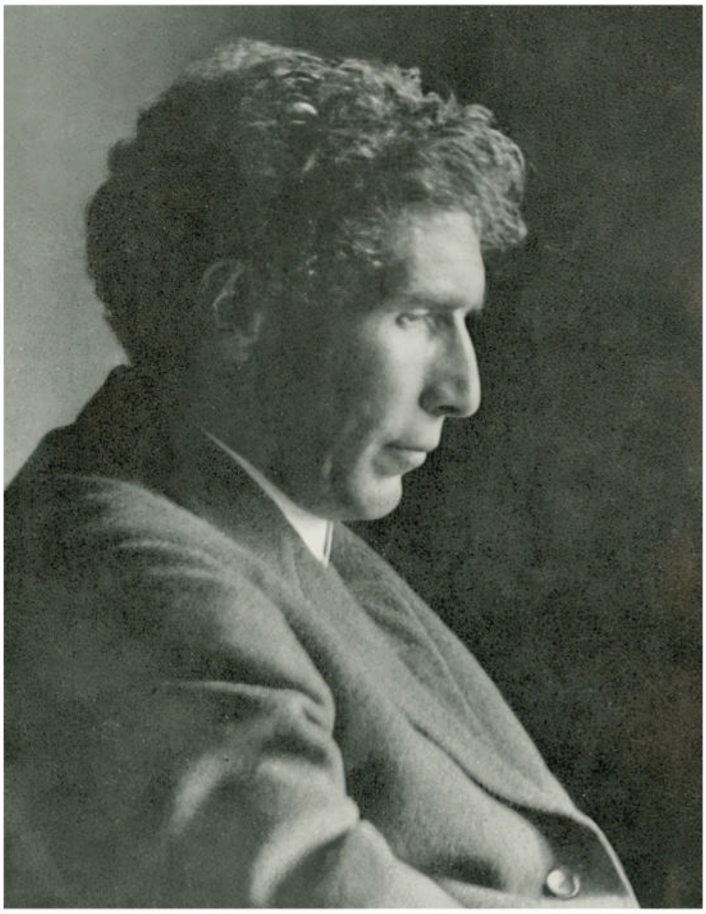
CRAZY JACK'S VISIONS

JOHN COWPER POWYS & A GLASTONBURY ROMANCE

The guilt-ridden son of a Victorian vicar, John Cowper Powys went on to channel his mystical impulses, poetic insights and sexual obsessions into a series of visionary novels. **STEVE MARSHALL** explores the life and work of one of Britain's weirdest and most wonderful writers.

Since they were written almost a century ago, John Cowper Powys's novels have lost none of their ability to amaze, inspire, horrify, perplex, and at times, disappoint. Although he liked to identify as Welsh, and lived out his later years in Wales, Powys the writer was unquestionably English and had almost every negative trait that goes with that. He was class-ridden, snobbish, at times xenophobic and priggish; he was sexually immature, not to say perverse; he was (literally) anally retentive, bound by habit and routine, unadventurous with food…

But these failings were more than compensated for by a unique appreciation of the Universe and its machinations. With a deep, poet's understanding of Nature and Cosmic Law, Powys could instinctively detect the butterfly effect at work. As his characters tread their mundane paths through life, their actions create ripples in space time that have monumental consequences, creating new events on a galactic scale. His mystical tales are staged before a dazzling backdrop: the numinous, ever-changing landscapes of the British Isles, observed and depicted in glowing, visionary detail throughout the seasons, as few others have succeeded in doing. Blake, Yeats, Samuel Palmer – there are more, but the list is not long.



HIS NOVELS HAVE LOST NONE OF THEIR POWER TO AMAZE, INSPIRE, HORRIFY AND PERPLEX

EARLY YEARS

John Cowper Powys was a product of the Victorian age, born in 1872 in Derbyshire, as the eldest of 11 children. When John was seven years old his father Charles moved the family south, briefly to Weymouth and Dorchester in Dorset, then to Montacute, Somerset, where Charles Powys was to remain the vicar for 32 years. Large families were the norm for clergymen and the Powyses lived in a 10-bedroomed vicarage that came with the job. However, life was harsh then, even for such a well-to-do family. The Powys's second daughter Eleanor died in 1893 in agony, aged 13, from peritonitis following appendicitis, when the village doctor attempted to treat her with leeches.

John's mother, Mary Cowper Powys, was artistically gifted and loved poetry, literature and painting. In her youth she was gregarious, fun-loving and creative; sadly, the life she could have enjoyed was smothered by her sense of duty, sacrificed to support her husband and raise a family. Producing 11 children in eighteen years must have been an enormous mental and physical strain, so it comes as no surprise that she was not much fun. In John Cowper Powys's 1934 *Autobiography* she is not mentioned once.

At 10 years old John was sent to board at Sherborne Preparatory School, along with his younger brother Littleton. Three years later, they both passed into the Big School, which John hated with a vengeance. There he developed the hypersexuality that is normal in adolescent boys, but from his writings he believed himself to be uniquely freakish, obsessive and perverse. He came to fetishise young girls with long, bare limbs and slim waists – something that lasted for the rest of his life and crops up frequently in his fiction. His guilt grew as he furtively scoured all manner of innocent reading matter to fuel his cravings – he could find girls with bare arms and legs even in boys' adventure storybooks and *Punch*.

In his *Autobiography* Powys recalls having crushes on pretty young *boys* (with long limbs, naturally) throughout his school years. This, again, is not abnormal, yet for Powys the guilt and shame were unbearable. His writings are peppered with references to long, bare limbs, and when Powys describes a girl as 'pretty' he usually means slim and boyish: we can easily see how Powys's sexuality may have formed quite differently with today's liberal attitudes. He was bullied of course and responded, as is so common, by

LEFT: The Powys family in the late 1890s. John is in the back row, second from right. **BELOW**: Powys's monumental *Autobiography* records his early life and many peculiarities.

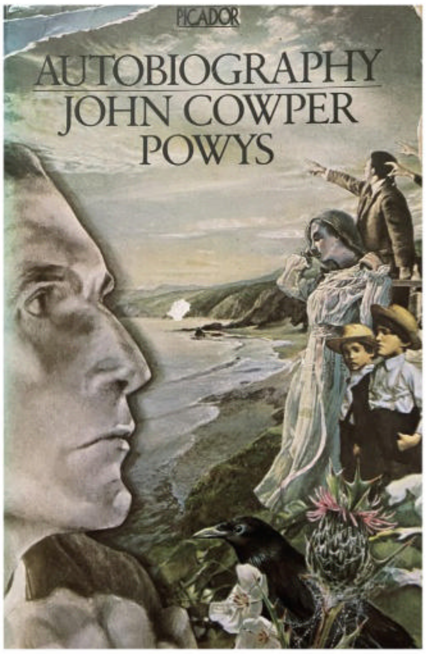
becoming a bully himself. This may have spawned the sadistic fantasising that Powys later openly admitted; it was likely the stress of those ghastly times at Sherborne that started the digestive problems that plagued him for the rest of his life.

Powys had many peculiarities. From childhood he was obsessed with walking sticks; in *Autobiography* he describes several of them in detail like old friends, with names such as 'Sacred'. In later life he would give names to particular rocks, trees and fences that he encountered on his daily walks. Like the rest of his family, he seems to have rarely eaten proper food, existing on tea, thinly sliced bread and butter, and the odd bowl of porridge. He was vehemently opposed to vivisection, especially of dogs; in many of his writings he finds opportunities to attack vivisectionists and in one of his last books he describes dropping bombs on them! [1]

NOT-SO-JOLLY ROGERING

After school, the 19-year-old Powys went to Corpus Christi, Cambridge, as his father had done. Although he tried several sports, he was not in the least bit athletic, so settled on taking very long walks, alone, as a way of quenching his rampant sexuality. This became a daily routine that endured for a lifetime. Leaving university with a history degree, John announced to his parents that he would not be joining the clergy as had been expected of him; to his surprise, they raised no objections. This episode, incidentally, was recycled into fiction and appears in *A Glastonbury Romance*.

Powys found lecturing work in several girls' schools around Hove in Sussex. Living alone in a country cottage, he continued trying to supress his sexual urges with long walks and cold baths; but whereas at Cambridge walking had brought "mystical ecstasies" it now tormented him with "revolting images". He tried pornography, renting "fantastical erotica" from a shop in Eastbourne; he tried prostitutes, some of them disturbingly young, whom he would pick up on Brighton beach.



A huge admirer of Thomas Hardy, Powys sent the Great Man a book of his poetry and Hardy replied with an invitation to tea at his home in Dorchester. [2] They met again when Hardy and his wife came to the vicarage in Montacute for tea. Many years later, Powys declared that the three greatest men he had met in his life were Charlie Chaplin, Augustus John and Thomas Hardy. [3]

In 1896, at the age of 24, Powys married Margaret Lyon. Exactly *why* he did this is a mystery: the marriage was a travesty. Powys continued to secretly trawl the beaches looking for young sylphs with slender limbs, recording his adventures in a hidden journal. He preferred masturbation to what he termed 'rogering' – stating many times that he didn't much like penetrative sex and had a particular fear of intercourse with a virgin. After Margaret was medically deflowered in a hospital, they somehow managed to produce a child, Littleton Alfred, born 1902. [4] Powys wrote in 1957, in reply to a letter from an admiring fan he barely knew, "I have a *horror* of 'fucking' as it is called. It is amazing how I ever managed to have a son!"

In a bid to make more money, Powys enlisted as a 'university extension lecturer' travelling around England by train and lecturing on English Literature in an adult education scheme sponsored by the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Constantly on the move, this was a gruelling way to make a living, but it suited Powys to be apart from Margaret and it was a good introduction to the career that was to follow. In 1905 Powys was invited to spend three months lecturing in the United States, working for an American university extension scheme; with his accent and his Oxford Gown he was a big hit.

GOING WEST

For the next 25 years Powys spent most of his time in the USA, dutifully sending money home to Margaret for her and Littleton's upkeep; every year he would return to England for just a couple of months. Poor Littleton was sent to Sherborne. Powys travelled thousands of miles across the United States, lecturing in all sorts of venues that were usually packed. He was a charismatic speaker and enormously popular, especially with working class audiences; he claimed those who liked him best were "Jews, communists and Catholics, because all these three are in essence *intensely religious*". He once addressed an audience of 2,000 people in Chicago; after speaking on Thomas Hardy for two hours he received a standing ovation, and they demanded more! [5] He befriended Isadora Duncan, who was a huge fan and once danced for him alone.

It is curious that Powys's novels so perfectly evoke the English countryside, since they were mostly written far from home on trains, as he zig-zagged his way across the United States between lectures. The world he describes is a combination of the Victorian England of his youth and 20th century England as he imagined it.

With his wife Margaret safely out of the way, Powys had several love affairs in America; Powys being Powys, they were naturally spoiled because he was so wracked with guilt and self-loathing. Frances Gregg was a remarkable young woman who was part of Ezra Pound's poetic circle. Powys (who was now calling himself 'Jack') was thoroughly smitten by her and was in a quandary. He couldn't marry Frances, or bear to never see her again, so he arranged for her to marry one of his friends, Louis Wilkinson, instead!

The newlywed Wilkinsons went to England for their honeymoon in 1912, accompanied by 'Jack' Powys and his sister Marian, who also lived in the USA. Powys was a firm believer in astrology and all the party had

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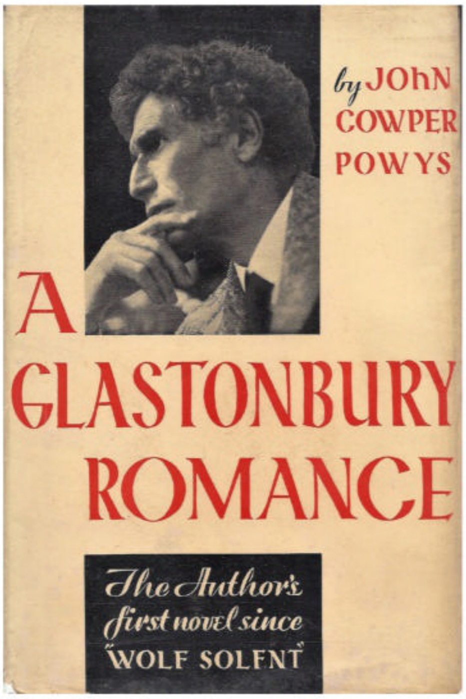

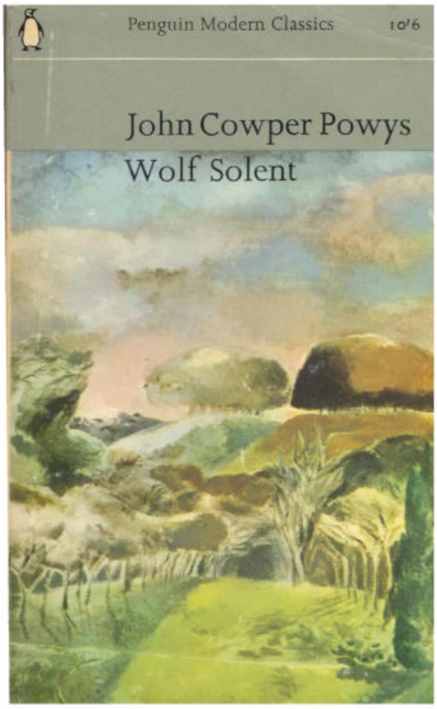

ABOVE: Glastonbury became the inspiration for Powys's best-known book, 1932's *A Glastonbury Romance*. **LEFT**: Powys's cycle of Wessex novels had begun in 1929 with *Wolf Solent*.

RUNNING THROUGH WOLD SOLENT IS AN UNDERCURENT OF SEXUAL DEPRAVITY AND REPRESSION

an interest in the occult. On 16 April, just two days after the *Titanic* sank, they tried table turning, encountering a spirit named 'Laroche' who had drowned in the disaster. His message was: "Frightful Disaster, assumed name, foreign affairs, my love, madness, madness…" On checking the list of *Titanic* casualties, they found the name 'Laroche'. The message was reported to the Society for Psychical Research.

Powys had premonitions of the impending Great War: "I don't at all like the look of 1914," he wrote to his brother Llewelyn at the start of that year. Powys and friends had been using cards to tell fortunes and Powys remarked that "the Ace of Spades the Death Card" was "continually turning up" for Louis Wilkinson; in fact it was Powys's mother who died that year. Powys came to know Aleister Crowley, who had become friendly with Louis. When Frances Wilkinson learned of this and tried to come between them, Crowley tried to have her certified insane. Powys was incensed, complaining that "that thrice-damned devil Aleister Crowley was trying to throw his infernal spells over Frances, nearly scaring her to death." [6] Ironically, Powys regarded *himself* as a magician.

There are two documented instances of Powys bilocating. One in the USA was recorded by Oliver Marlow Wilkinson who related: "He wrote Theodore Dreiser he was making a journey the following day and Dreiser expressed regret that he wouldn't be seeing him. He said 'Dreiser, I will be with you at 2 o'clock tomorrow precisely.' At 2 o'clock next day Dreiser looked up and there was Jack, observed as clearly as if he had actually been there. Then the image slowly faded." [7]

A similar episode was described by Peter Powys Grey just before his death in 1992. He told how soon after his marriage, he and his bride went to visit his uncle, John Cowper Powys, in Wales. Grey told an amusing story about the eccentric vicar from their wedding, and Powys came back with an angry "How dare you make fun of a man of the cloth!" The newlyweds hastily left and headed back to their hotel, which was sited below Powys's house at the bottom of a steep hill and most easily accessed by a zig-jag road. They decided to take the alternative route, a steep and perilous stony path; hand in hand they scrambled and slid all the way down to the foyer of the hotel. Relieved at their escape, they were just about to enter the hotel when the swing-doors burst open and Powys appeared, shouting: "No tea! No tea!" Then the doors closed, and he was gone. Grey later insisted that it was impossible for a man in his seventies (who was wearing unlaced boots) to have reached the hotel before them, by either route. [8]

Powys did not enlist in World War I, but remained in the USA for most of it. German submarines made the Atlantic Ocean too dangerous to cross and his schooldays had instilled in him a fear of the parade ground – he could not face the embarrassment of having to fall out of line to urinate! [9] The war years saw nine of Powys's works published, including poetry, essays and two novels. They were largely ignored.

In 1921 John met Phyllis Playter, the love of his life: he was 48 and she was 26. They were to be together for 40 years. Intellectual, slim and long-limbed, she was bookish, sensitive and sometimes depressive – the ideal woman of his fantasies. They met in Missouri when Powys was lecturing there. From 1923 the couple lived together in Greenwich Village, though secretly, as this was considered shameful at the time. Fortunately, their neighbour in the next-door apartment was the bohemian poet e.e. cummings, whose discretion could be relied upon. Although the relationship was well known to their close friends in America, Powys's wife and son did not learn of it until 1934, when John's will was altered to include Phyllis.

WESSEX VISIONS

LEFT: Powys in 1925, with one of his many walking sticks. **BELOW**: Powys and Phyllis Plater at Phudd Bottom in rural Upstate New York in the early 1930s.

Wolf Solent, the first of Powys's four Wessex novels, was published in 1929, to great acclaim. In it, acknowledging the influence of Thomas Hardy, Powys painted an extraordinarily vivid and mystical picture of Dorset, a place he had left decades before; this was all the more remarkable considering that it was entirely written on Powys's epic rail journeys, "travelling through all the states of the United States except two". The eponymous Wolf is based on Powys himself – a philosopher of the natural world, who adores long-limbed, slim-waisted young women. It features many real Dorset towns that have been given fictional names, such as Sherborne, renamed 'Ramsgard'. *Wolf Solent* was well received, and its success helped to sell some of Powys's works of popular philosophy, such as *In Defence of Sensuality*.

Running through *Wolf Solent* is a strong undercurrent of sexual depravity and repression that is blatantly autobiographical, and that set a pattern for Powys's further novels. He went on to publish three more Wessex novels: *A Glastonbury Romance* in 1932, *Weymouth Sands* in 1934 and *Maiden Castle* in 1936. The monumental *Autobiography* was also published in 1934; highly regarded by writers such as JB Priestley, it is eccentric and fascinating, though rather long, as so many of Powys's books are. There are virtually no women in *Autobiography* – a decision Powys made before he began writing it. This seems peculiar but was actually because he was living with Phyllis but still married to Margaret, a Catholic who was unable to divorce.

In 1930 Powys persuaded Phyillis Playter to move with him from cosmopolitan Greenwich Village to Hillsdale, a rural village near Albany in Upstate New York. The house, which they named 'Phudd Bottom', was isolated, with no electricity, heating or indoor plumbing. I spent several winters in Upstate New York myself, living just five miles from Hillsdale, and have never experienced such extreme weather anywhere. After the baking drought of summer, the winter snow lays three feet deep for months at a time, and temperatures stay far below freezing for the entire winter. There is a necessary daily routine of clearing snow from paths and breaking off 10-foot- (3m) long icicles from the gutters. Living there must have been torture for Phyllis, who hated the cold. She did all the cooking, cleaning and looking after guests, despite suffering agonising menstrual pains with 24-hour vomiting bouts. [10] In domestic matters Powys was worse than useless, unable to even light a fire without burning the carpet. He began writing *A Glastonbury Romance* just a week after moving to Phudd Bottom and finished a year and a half later. Powys had by now come to regard himself as a shaman and a 'visionary writer'.

Today, *A Glastonbury Romance* is Powys's best-known book, continually rediscovered by successive generations of readers. Powys determined before writing it that he would not use fictional place names as he had done in *Wolf Solent*, so he and his brother spent some time reconnoitring Glastonbury and the surrounding area for geographical details. This turned out not to be such a good decision for Powys. One of his characters, the odious Philip Crow, is the fictional owner of the Wookey Hole caves, a popular tourist attraction. Crow is having a secret affair, and the book originally included a lengthy sex scene inside the caves. On publication, the *real* owner of Wookey Hole objected. Gerard Hodgkinson, a decorated military man and first-class cricketer, brought a libel action, claiming he had been wrongly portrayed as Philip Crow. Hodgkinson won substantial damages, financially crippling Powys. Later editions included a disclaimer in the preface and eight pages were removed.

Powys declared that the true heroine of *A Glastonbury Romance* was the Grail. Owen Evans, one of the lead characters, is heavily based on Powys himself – Evans is a gaunt Welshman with a prominent, bony nose and a passion for the Grail myths, particularly those that relate to Wales and Glastonbury. Evans, like Powys, is a closet sadist who obsesses about pornography. Three of the characters are communists. Many intellectuals at that time believed communism to be the only way forward; Powys despised fascism and Stalinism, describing himself as a "parlour Bolshevik" and rather more fancifully as an anarchist.

From childhood, Powys had a lifetime of digestive problems, often experimenting with strange diets such as living on raw eggs, mouldy bread and milk only, to combat his peptic ulcers. He suffered badly with near-continual constipation, and it fell on the long-suffering Phyllis to treat this by administering enemas, sometimes every few days. From Powys's diaries it is clear that in his old age this also had a sexual element. [11] This was another aspect of Powys's real life that bled through into his fiction. At a crucial point in *A Glastonbury Romance* the hero John Crow has a vision of the Grail and tries to tell everyone what he has seen, but no one will listen. Next morning Crow tries again, but must first attend to Abel Twig, an old man he has promised to help, who has chronic constipation and piles. After giving Twig a lengthy enema, Crow gives up and decides to keep quiet about his vision.

DORSET AND WALES

The *Glastonbury Romance* libel action was disastrous, since Powys had given up lecturing and he and Phyllis were banking on income from the book that never came. Living at Phudd Bottom was too expensive, and Powys had a yearning to live in Wales, so in 1934 they left America and moved first back to Dorset, where several of the Powys family lived. Powys's third Wessex novel *Weymouth Sands* was published in the USA in 1934, then in the UK in 1935. Powys, nervous in the wake of the libel case, retitled the UK edition as *Jobber Skald* after one of the book's characters.

A Glastonbury Romance

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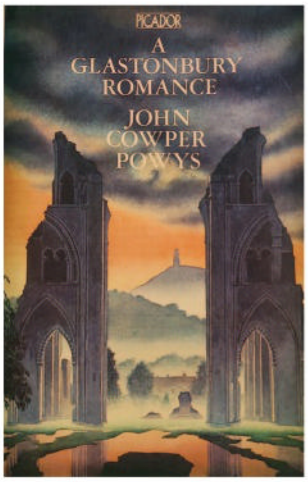
SIMON MORETON

Any potential reader of *A Glastonbury Romance* is likely to be put off initially by its sheer size: this brick of a book runs to more than 1,100 pages, containing almost half a million words. Some authors might begin such a work with a few short and accessible sentences, to gently coax readers in. Not so John Cowper Powys. Page one of *A Glastonbury Romance* (below) has been described as "the Beecher's Brook of English fiction".

"At the striking of noon on a certain fifth of March, there occurred within a causal radius of Brandon railway-station and yet beyond the deepest pools of emptiness between the utmost stellar systems one of those infinitesimal ripples in the creative silence of the First Cause which always occur when an exceptional stir of heightened consciousness agitates any living organism in this astronomical universe. Something passed at that moment, a wave, a motion, a vibration, too tenuous to be called magnetic, too subliminal to be called spiritual, between the soul of a particular human being who was emerging from a third-class railway carriage of the twelve-nineteen train from London and the divine-diabolic soul of the First Cause of all life.

In the soul of the great blazing sun, too, as it poured down its rays upon this man's head, while he settled his black travelling bag comfortably in his left hand and his hazel-stick in his right, there were complicated superhuman vibrations; but these had only the filmiest, faintest, remotest connexion with what the man was feeling. They had more connexion with the feelings of certain primitive tribes of men in the heart of Africa and with the feelings of a few intellectual sages in various places in the world who had enough imagination to recognise the conscious personality of this fiery orb as it flung far and wide its life-giving magnetic forces. Roaring, cresting, heaving, gathering, mounting, advancing, receding, the enormous fire-thoughts of this huge luminary surged resistlessly to and fro, evoking a turbulent aura of psychic activity, corresponding to the physical energy of its colossal chemical body, but affecting this microscopic biped's nerves less than the wind that blew against his face."



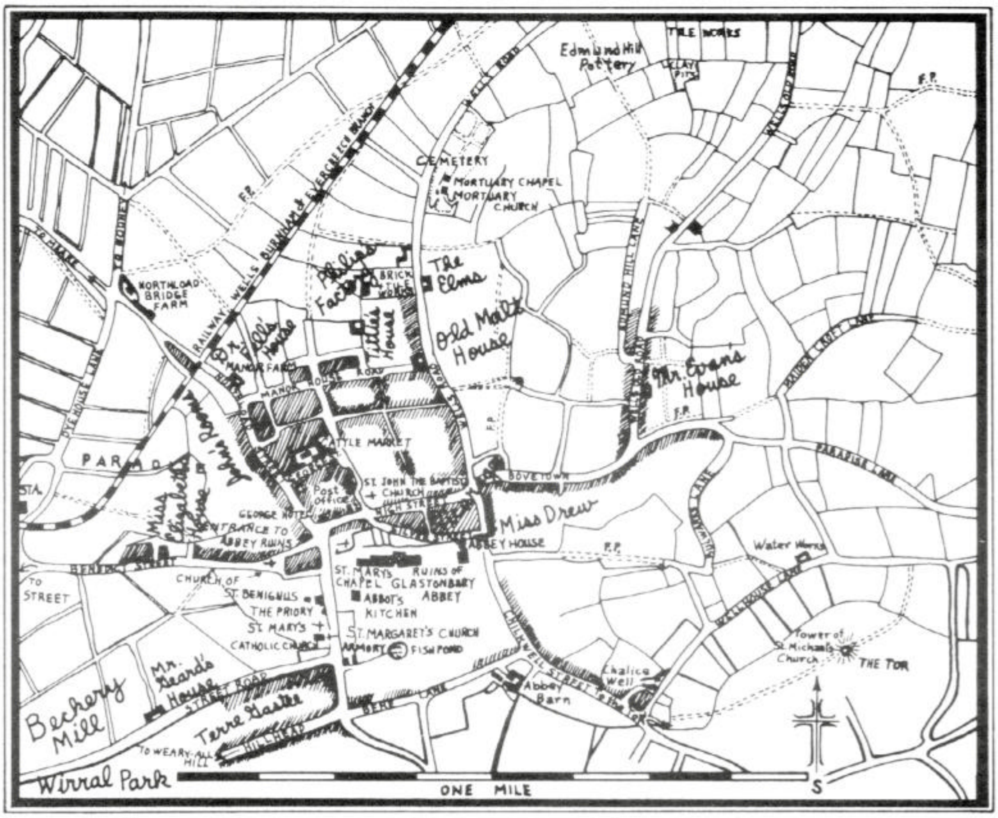
Any potential reader is likely to be put off by its sheer size

Having established that the Sun has both consciousness and a soul, Powys lays out his plot. He thoughtfully provides a list of about 50 main characters, which most readers will refer to often. As several characters are embroiled in secret affairs, there is a lot of sex (though none is explicit). The legends of King Arthur and the Holy Grail recur throughout.

The tale begins in March, presumably of 1931, when the Crow family from the Glastonbury area of Somerset assemble in Northwold, Norfolk, for the funeral of Canon William Crow. Penniless John Crow, a man of about 35, hopes to find employment with his cousin Philip, a wealthy industrialist who owns a dye-works, a tin mine and the Wookey Hole tourist attraction. At the funeral John meets his young cousin Mary, and the two immediately embark on a passionate love affair. The novel follows their progress over the next 12 months.

Mary lives in the huge Abbey House in Glastonbury with her employer, Euphemia Drew, an elderly spinster. Mary has travelled to the funeral with her aunt, Elizabeth Crow, who also lives in Glastonbury and is the daughter of Canon Crow. However, the Canon has left almost all of his considerable fortune to John Geard, a dissenting Glastonbury preacher who will use the bequest to finance a lavish historical Pageant and Passion Play in Glastonbury, aiming to re-establish the town as a spiritual centre and a place of pilgrimage. Mr Geard gives John Crow a full-time job organising and publicising the Pageant, scheduled for June.

John meets Owen Evans, a


TILE WORKS
Edmund Hill Pottery
CLAY PITS
F.P.
CEMETERY
MORTUARY CHAPEL
MORTUARY CHURCH
WELLS ROAD
F.P.
RAILWAY WELLS BURNHAM & EVERCREECH BRANCH
TO MEARE
NORTHLOAD BRIDGE FARM
Philip's Factory
BRICK TILE WORKS
The Elms
Old Malt House
Tittie's House
Dr. Fell's House
MANOR FARM
MANOR HOUSE ROAD
Mr. Evan's House
EDMUND HILL LANE
MAIDEN CROFT LANE
PARADISE LANE
DYE HOUSE LANE
PARADE
STA.
John's Rooms
Miss Elizabeth's House
CATTLE MARKET
Post Office
ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST CHURCH
HIGH STREET
BOVETOWN
Miss Drew
GEORGE HOTEL
ENTRANCE TO ABBEY RUINS
ABBEY HOUSE
F.P.
Water Works
BENEDICT STREET
TO STREET
CHURCH OF ST. BENIGNUS
THE PRIORY
ST. MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH
ST. MARY'S CHAPEL
RUINS OF GLASTONBURY ABBEY
ABBOT'S KITCHEN
ST. MARGARET'S CHURCH
ARMORY
FISH POND
CHILKWELL STREET TO THE TOR
WELLHOUSE LANE
Tower of St. Michael's Church
THE TOR
Chalice Well
Abbey Barn
BERE LANE
Mr. Geard's House
STREET ROAD
Terre Gaste
Beckery Mill
TO WEARY-ALL HILL
HILLHEAD
Wirral Park
ONE MILE
S

ABOVE: A 1930s map of Glastonbury with annotations by John Cowper Powys.

mystically inclined Welshman. Mr Evans is secretly a sadist, who gets a sexual thrill from fantasising, particularly about someone being killed by having their skull smashed in with an iron bar. Mr Evans also fantasises about seeing the Holy Grail, which legend says is buried in Glastonbury.

John Crow is reunited with Tom Barter, his dearest childhood friend, who works as a manager for one of Philip Crow's businesses. Crow owns an aeroplane, which is piloted by Barter.

Sub-plots feature characters such as Rev. Mat Dekker and his son Sam, and Mother Legge, who keeps a bawdy house where amorous couples can rent bedrooms by the hour. Some characters have outrageously rustic Somerset accents and Dickensian names such as Isaac Weatherwax, Penny Pitches, 'Mad Bet' Chinnock, Abel Twig, Tossie Stickles, and 'Red' Robinson: a Cockney Communist who seems to have been voice-coached by Dick Van Dyke.

When preacher John Geard is elected Mayor of Glastonbury, he has a 'Saxon Arch' built to surround the sacred chalybeate spring that flows from Chalice Hill; to Geard it represents the 'blood of Christ' that he preaches about.

John Crow crosses the River Brue at Pomparlès Bridge, where in the Grail Legend King Arthur is said to have thrown his sword Excalibur into the water. John looks down into the mud and in a blinding flash he has a stupendous vision – quivering and gleaming, an object resembling a sword falls into the mud of the river! It vanishes, leaving no trace.

At dawn on 23 June all is ready for the Glastonbury Pageant. The fields below the Tor are lined with tents and flags, with hundreds of costumed performers. John Crow's publicity has paid off – there are vast crowds of visitors from all over Europe, as well as striking workers from Philip Crow's dye-works who are threatening to disrupt the proceedings. Led by Red Robinson, a mob of Communist strikers attempts to storm the stage, but they are thwarted by a large company of policemen. The Pageant continues regardless, and the Passion Play begins. Mr Evans plays Jesus in the Crucifixion scene. He is led out wearing a huge crown of thorns, is tied to the cross and raised aloft. Evans has an horrific, sadistic vision of human and animal suffering, then faints and bursts a blood-vessel: with blood running from his mouth, the audience think he has really died. Unconscious, he is taken down from the cross and driven to hospital. The Pageant has been a huge success.

In August, John and Mary Crow marry and there are miracles. Geard cures a woman's cancer by immersing her in the chalybeate spring; someone brings a child who has just died, and he comes back to life! Tossie Stickles has twins and marries their father, Tom Barter.

Sam Dekker is out walking along the River Brue at night, when he has a vision of the Grail. He sees a globular chalice with two circular handles, made of some substance clearer than crystal; within it is dark water streaked with blood, and within the water a shining fish. The vision fades and Sam wants to tell everyone what he has seen, but no one will listen.

John Crow, Tom Barter and his new bride Tossie Stickles go for a night walk on the Tor, where the homicidal vagrant Codfin is lurking. Brandishing an iron bar, Codfin sneaks up behind John. Tom rushes to intervene; instead of the bar hitting John's head, it hits Tom, killing him instantly. Mr Evans has fantasised about this for years but when he sees Tom's body with its skull smashed in, he vomits uncontrollably. Next day, his hair has turned white.

In March a gale from the west combines with freak tides to produce unprecedented flooding. The Somerset Levels become a vast lake, returning the three hills of Glastonbury to their original state as islands. The railways stop and the military are called in. Boats are brought from all around Somerset and emergency food supplies are flown in by plane. There are many reports of drownings. Sam and Mat Dekker rescue dozens of people with a large boat they have found; Mr Geard sets out in a tiny rowing boat, trying to rescue more, whilst accepting that he is destined to drown. Geard rescues Philip Crow, who is inside his aeroplane as it floats along on the flood. Geard, who cannot swim, leaves his boat and stands on an aeroplane wing as it slowly sinks. He finally drowns staring frantically at the Tor. Does he see the Grail at the end? Who can know.

"Above the mounting flood rose still the broken tower arch of the ruined Abbey, rose still the tower of the Baptist, rose still the tower of the Archangel. These remain; enduring this deluge, as they had endured others; but the doomsday of these also must finally come. Towers are they, like those of Rome and Jerusalem, built to storm the Infinite, to besiege the Absolute, but subject like those to the shocks of time and of chance.

"The builders of Stonehenge have perished; but there are those who worship its stones still. The builders of Glastonbury have perished; but there are people, yet living amongst us, who have seen the Grail. The ribs of our ancient earth are riddled with desperate pieties; her hollow caves are scooped out with frantic asseverations; and the end is not yet.

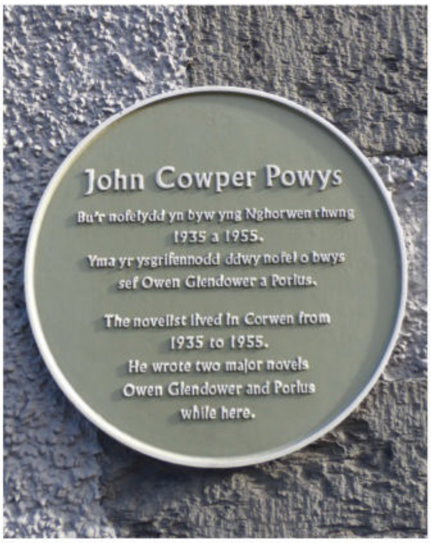
"The Towers of Cybele still move in the darkness from cult to cult, from revelation to revelation. Made of a stuff more lasting than granite, older than basalt, harder than marble, and yet as insubstantial as the airiest mystery of thought, these Towers of the journeying Mother still trouble the dreams of men with their tremulous uprising. Bowed beneath the desolation of futility, eaten by the worm of despair, these tragic Towers still rise from our planet's surface, still sway disconsolately in the wind of its orbit, still gleam cold and white under its recurrent moon."

LEFT: Powys in his adopted home of Wales. **BELOW**: A plaque marking the house in Corwen in which Powys and Phyllis lived for 20 years.

Weymouth Sands features a John Cowper Powys-like character, 'Magnus Muir', and the evil 'Doctor Brush' who runs a mental asylum and has a side-hustle as a vivisectionist. Just as in *A Glastonbury Romance* there are many working-class characters who speak with outrageously silly West Country accents. To Powys, *Weymouth Sands* was about the mystical connection between people and places. As he wrote in a 1933 magazine article: "The book deals in fact with the psychic interplay of spiritual and chemical forces, between nature and men and women, in one particular spot." [12]

Phyllis Playter was crucial to Powys's writing, functioning as his editor and advisor. She was miserable in Dorset, probably because of being in such close contact with the wildly dysfunctional Powys family. John was writing constantly during their time in Dorset and had begun his fourth Wessex novel, *Maiden Castle.* In 1935 they moved to Wales: a new home in Corwen in the county of Denbighshire, where they were to remain for the next 20 years. Powys completed two more potboilers – *A Philosophy of Solitude* and *The Art of Happiness* – which Phyllis disapproved of as a diversion from novel writing, but his nonfiction books brought in some much-needed income.

"THE BOOK DEALS WITH THE PSYCHIC INTERPLAY BETWEEN SPIRITUAL AND CHEMICAL FORCES"


John Cowper Powys
Bu'r nofelydd yn byw yng Nghorwen rhwng
1935 a 1955.
Yma yr ysgrifennodd ddwy nofel o bwys
sef Owen Glendower a Porlus.
The novelist lived in Corwen from
1935 to 1955.
He wrote two major novels
Owen Glendower and Porlus
while here.

ELLIOT BROWN / FLICKR / CREATIVE COMMONS

Maiden Castle is set in Dorset, as was Hardy's *Mayor of Casterbridge.* It features characters with unlikely Powysian names, such as 'Enoch Quirm' a Welsh historical novelist who is trying to connect with the old gods of Maiden Castle, a prehistoric hillfort. The Powys character is 'Dud No-man', so-called by his wife after failing to consummate their marriage. She had died a virgin. With shades of Thomas Hardy, Dud buys a bride, a circus girl named 'Wizzie Ravelston'. In the end she goes off to America with 'Thuella Wye', a painter, "mostly of clouds".

John Cowper Powys was regarded as a celebrity in Corwen; he and Phyllis were welcomed warmly in and quickly made new friends. They made no secret of the fact that they were not married, but no one seemed bothered, as they were considered 'arty'. Phyllis was always addressed as 'Mrs Powys'. As soon as they arrived, John began enthusiastically trying to speak Welsh; but as no-one could understand him, and as everyone spoke English anyway, he soon gave up. Powys immersed himself in Welsh history and mythology, reading all he could.

A neighbour who had known Powys as a child spoke of him treating tramps and the poor residents of Corwen's slums with great kindness and generosity. She described him going for a walk up the mountain every morning with his spaniel and a walking stick from his large collection. This walk would last hours, she said, "because he would worship stones and trees on the way." When her father was in hospital Powys "wrote to tell him that on the morning of the operation he would go to worship before his most special tree. He would walk around the tree 12 times and call upon the most potent spirits and my father would be alright…"

As Powys's fame grew, so did his postbag; he received an ever-increasing amount of correspondence and fan-mail every day. Even though it put such a demand on his time and energy, he insisted on personally answering each letter individually, and never got the hang of using stock phrases in reply. Admirers arriving at the door were fielded by Phyllis. Those demanding to see Powys were rebuffed; if she thought them especially rude, she would slam the door on them.

Phyllis had always hated *Maiden Castle* and encouraged Powys to drop the romance format and write an historical novel about Owen Glendower, the Welsh hero. It was in their hometown of Corwen that Owen Glendower's rebellion against Henry IV had begun in 1400, so Powys began researching and visiting places in the surrounding district that featured in Glendower's story. Before he could begin writing this new book though, he had to finish *Maiden Castle,* and *Morwyn,* a book attacking vivisection. Researching and writing *Owen Glendower* took over two and a half years; it was completed in

December 1939 when World War II had just begun. The book was published in the USA in 1941, but Powys had terrible trouble finding a UK publisher; it finally appeared in 1942, to mixed reviews and disappointing sales. Powys resumed writing pot-boilers.

DARK AGE ALCHEMY

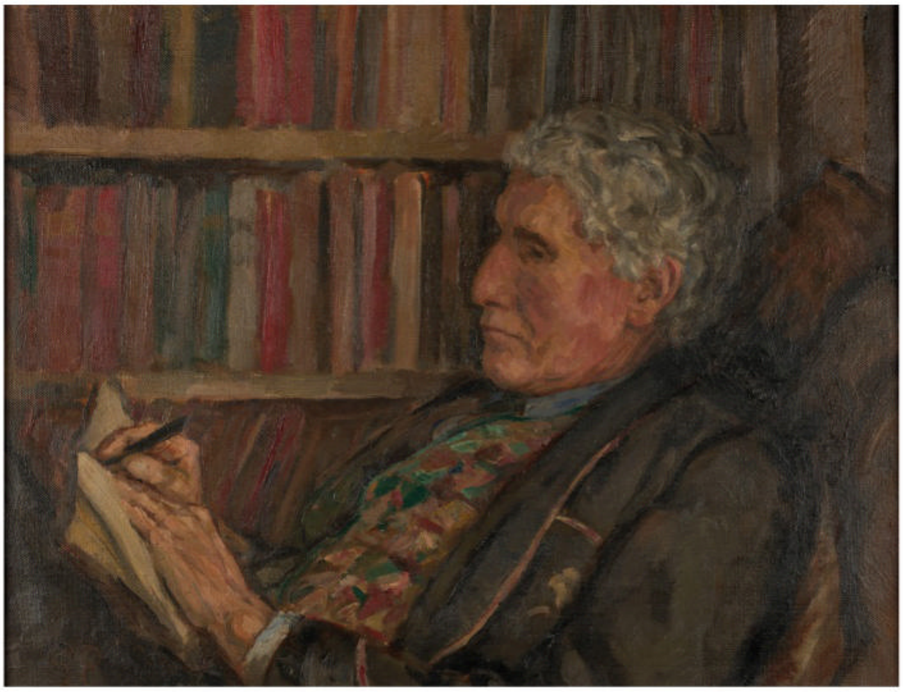
Porius was the second of Powys's Welsh novels, and he regarded it as his finest book, his masterpiece. Many readers, even devoted Powys fans, would disagree. The book is another brick, bigger than *A Glastonbury Romance*, with even more characters. Powys began to write *Porius* in 1942 and it took seven years to complete. He intended it to be another historical novel, set in the Corwen of the Dark Ages. Despite the book's vast size, all the action takes place in one week – from the 18th to the 25th of October AD 499.

The main character Porius is a Welsh prince, son of the reigning prince of Edeyrmion and descended from Cunedda, a great Brythonic chieftain. The Romans are still in charge, with local leaders ruling on their behalf. Corwen is surrounded by dense forest populated by hostile aboriginals. Porius has found that Saxons are advancing on Edeyrmion and that Arthur, Emperor of Britain, is marching to head them off. The magician Merlin (here called 'Myrddin Wyllt') has been sent to help the prince; there are Druids, giants, a magic child, and a magician imprisoned below ground by a sorceress on top of Mount Snowdon.

But for Powys, nothing was simple. According to Powysian scholar Morine Krissdóttir, *Porius* is *actually* an alchemical allegory, the seven days of the story representing the seven stages of the alchemical process of transformation. Not surprisingly, this is far from obvious to the vast majority of readers. Porius undergoes a personal transformation over those seven days, and there are other instances, such as when the magician Myrddin transforms the owl Blodeuwedd into a young girl. Krissdóttir has analysed the entire story and shown how it fits the stages of the alchemical 'work'.[13]

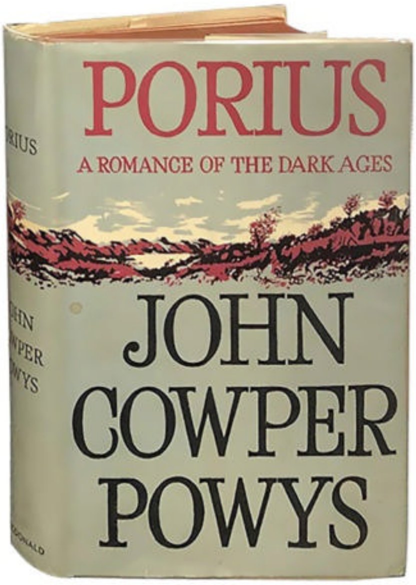
Many readers think that *Porius* is just simply too long, and that was certainly the opinion of every publisher that Powys offered it to. Simon and Schuster had published all Powys's previous novels in the USA: they declared it "undecipherable and overwritten". The Bodley Head, Powys's UK publisher, refused to take it unless it was reduced by a third. Powys did this but due to their "insultingly small offer" he then turned them down. It was finally published by Macdonald and Co. in 1951, drastically abridged. Two recent attempts were made to restore it using the original manuscript – the 2007 version published by Overlook Duckworth is considered to be definitive.

Mr and Mrs Powys grew weary of constant visitors turning up at their door: Corwen, they decided, was just too accessible. So, in 1955 they made their final move, to the more remote Blaenau Ffestiniog. Powys continued writing until his death in 1963, though his later works are bizarre (not in a good way) and mostly truly awful. *Atlantis,* for example, is about the final voyage of Odysseus and is set in Homeric Greece, with little mention of Atlantis. The main characters are a stone pillar, a wooden club used by Hercules, an olive bush and a housefly. They communicate telepathically. Even worse is *Three Fantasies*, which features conversations between an armchair and a carpet, as well as some cringeworthy attempts at science fiction.



HERITAGE IMAGE PARTNERSHIP LTD / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: A 1944 portrait of Powys by his sister Gertrude Powys. **BELOW**: The 1942 novel *Porius*, a tale of Wales in the Dark Ages, which Powys considered his finest book.



For all his faults, John Cowper Powys is widely regarded as one of the finest writers Britain has ever produced, though almost a century after they were written, his books continue to be controversial. CA Coates wrote that Powys "evokes both massive contempt and near idolatry." It is the custom in Britain to ignore great artists until they are dead, but fortunately this did not happen to Powys; he was praised in his lifetime by such diverse figutes as JB Priestley, Iris Murdoch, Henry Miller and Margaret Drabble. In the last few years before his death at 91, Powys received an honorary 'Doctor of Letters' degree and three nominations for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

NOTES

1 John Cowper Powys, *Three Fantasies*, Paladin, London, 1985, p.139.

2 John Cowper Powys, *Autobiography*, Colgate University Press, Hamilton, NY, 1968, p.227.

3 Herbert Williams, *John Cowper Powys*, Seren, Bridgend, 1997, p.79.

4 Morine Krissdóttir, *Descents of Memory*, Overlook Duckworth, New York, 2007, p.87.

5 Williams, *John Cowper Powys*, p.53.

6 Ibid., p.89.

7 Ibid., p.89.

8 Ibid., p.90.

9 Ibid., p.59.

10 Krissdóttir, *Descents of Memory*, p.250.

11 Ibid., p.369.

12 Ibid., p.97.

13 Ibid., p.374.

'Map of Glastonbury with 1930s notations by John Cowper Powys' was first published in "Aspects of the Topography of A Glastonbury Romance", by Susan Rands, in the *Powys Review*, No. 20, 1987.

Special thanks to Kevin Taylor of The Powys Society: https://powys-society.org/

STEVE MARSHALL began writing for FT in 2007 and his many contributions include John Michell's last interview. He is the author of five books including the best-selling *Exploring Avebury: The Essential Guide* and *Acoustics* from Wooden Books.

A MINI SEARCH FOR THE MIRACULOUS

In 1983, during a summer-long European "mini-search for the miraculous", **GARY LACHMAN** visited Stonehenge, Chartres Cathedral and other locations. This extract from his new book finds him at the site of Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, dowsing in Glastonbury, hitchhiking to Cornwall to visit megalithic sites and meeting his favourite writer.

GARY LACHMAN PHOTO COURTESY OF LISA JANE PERSKY

Rue des Colonels Renard, near the Arc de Triomphe in the 17th *arrondissement*, is situated in a well-heeled part of Paris, featuring fashionable apartments at vertigo-inducing rents. In the late 1930s and throughout the Nazi occupation, it was not so affluent a neighbourhood. Rents were low and the occupants of nearby buildings led modest lives. When Gurdjieff finally had to let go of the Château du Prieuré, which had fallen into disuse after the collapse of his institute, little more than a year after its opening, it was here that his followers found him a new home.

He would live at number 6 from 1937 until his death in October 1949. It was here that he held his legendary lunches and dinners, during which up to 50 people crammed into his small flat, and were treated to lavish dishes prepared by the master himself (like Aleister Crowley and CG Jung, Gurdjieff was a good cook). Kenneth Walker and others have left accounts of what these dinners were like and what the effect of the notorious "toasts to the idiots", carried out with vodka, could be on the unprepared. They have also described the flat's décor, with amateurish paintings by indigent locals adorning the walls – bought by Gurdjieff so they would have money to eat – oriental bric-a-brac filling the shelves, and the aroma of exotic spices from Gurdjieff's pantry saturating the place.

When I arrived, walking up from the Etoile, there was little to do but stand outside the building, smoke a *Gauloises*, and think of the people – like Walker, JG Bennett, Fritz Peters and others – who had visited Gurdjieff and had written about their experiences there. I did find the café Gurdjieff used to frequent and had a *café noir* in his memory.

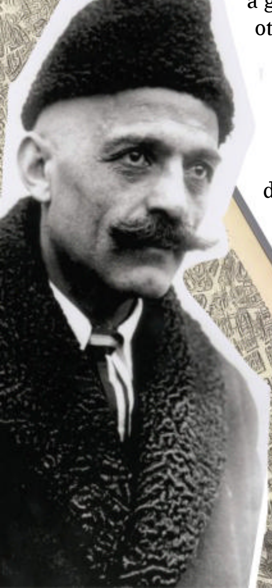
INSTITUT GURDJIEFF
CHÂTEAU DU PRIEURÉ
FONTAINEBLEAU - AVON
PRES PARIS
Tél. 107

LEFT: Gary Lachman's younger self, ready for a European adventure. **BELOW:** Traces of Gurdjieff, from the Rue des Colonels Renard in Paris to the Château du Prieuré at Fontainebleu, where writer Katherine Mansfield came seeking a cure in 1922.

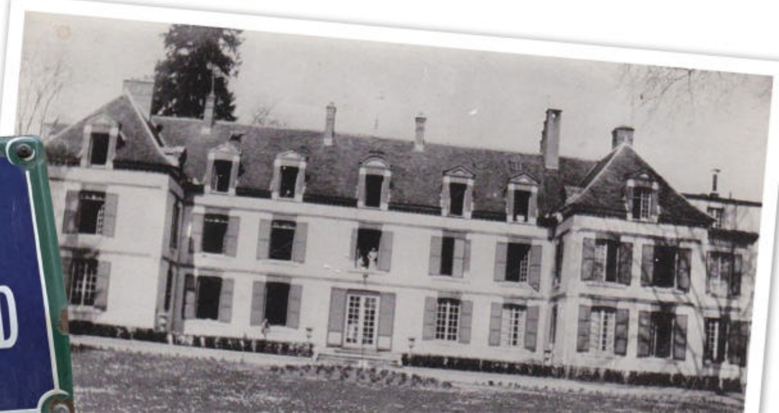
The train from Gare de Lyon to Fontainebleau took about an hour. Someone in Los Angeles who had been there had given me directions from the train station to the Château Le Prieuré where, some 60 years earlier, the first wave of Gurdjieff's English students – people like the editor AR Orage, the psychoanalyst Maurice Nicoll, and the intelligence officer JG Bennett – had submitted themselves to the master's tutelage.[1]

Although Gurdjieff had lived and taught in France for more than 20 years, the French had never taken to him. The strong Catholic and Traditionalist elements in French esotericism saw him as a positive danger, and the rationalist streak in the French psyche rejected any form of mysticism *tout court*.

In Paris, writers and philosophers are honoured with street names;



RUE DES
COLONELS RENARD



WEARYALL HILL: STEPHEN SPRAGGON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

GLASTONBURY ABBEY: LIES THROUGH A LENS / CREATIVE COMMONS

even the alchemist Nicolas Flamel has a rue named after him. Gurdjieff gets no mention, but *en route* to the château I saw a plaque commemorating "The Forest Philosophers", a tag given to the people attending Gurdjieff's institute by the journalists of the day. Mention is made, though, of Katharine Mansfield, the young New Zealand writer who, dying of tuberculosis and desperate to try any means of staving off the disease, asked her friend Orage for an introduction to Gurdjieff. Mansfield arrived at the Prieuré in late October 1922, and died there in early January the next year. A street leading from the train station to the cemetery where she is buried is named after her as well.

Again, 40 years on, details of my visit are vague, but some strong impressions remain. I can remember walking in the forest, thinking of the account JG Bennett left of his experience when – as they had in myself many years later – his attempt to master a difficult series of the strange Gurdjieff 'movements' led to the opening of what Gurdjieff called his "accumulator", an internal storage device housing our energies. Bennett's experience was, however, altogether more powerful than mine. He writes not only of how his dysentery miraculously vanished, but of his going into the forest and digging at a rate even the galvanised Orage would have found daunting, and of Gurdjieff's speaking to him of the "Great Accumulator", a source of power and force that very few individuals could access.[2]

I remember seeing the goldfish pond that I had read about in different accounts of life at the institute. But what stands out the most is what I saw when I looked through one of the windows into the château itself. It was closed and apparently had been unoccupied for some time. Yet what I saw when I peeked inside made me laugh. What was there? Rows of washing machines, lined up, as if in a laundromat. What they were doing there I had no idea, nor was there anyone to ask. But given that Gurdjieff's mission was to fight our mechanicalness, the fact that his old institute was still home to machines seemed superbly appropriate.[3]

GEOFFREY ASHE
THE FINGER AND THE MOON
A GRIPPING, MINDSTRETCHING NOVEL OF THE OCCULT
Panther

> There was one sacred site that I wanted to visit before Cornwall. This was Glastonbury

II

I returned to England via Amsterdam on the ferry and made my way to London. I intended to travel west, to Cornwall, to visit some of the megalithic sites I had read about. At a map shop near St Paul's Cathedral – the name escapes me now – I bought an ordnance survey map of the area; I had already been finding my way around London, Paris and Amsterdam with the excellent old Falk Plan maps. Another stop was the Village Bookshop on Regent Street. I remembered from my past visit, in 1981, that the owner knew Colin Wilson.

ABOVE: Wearyall Hill, with Glastonbury Tor in the distance, and Glastonbury Abbey, legendary resting place of King Arthur. **LEFT:** Glastonbury resident Geoffrey Ashe's mystical 1973 novel *The Finger and the Moon*.

My ultimate aim was to find Wilson's home, Tetherdown, in Gorran Haven, and I thought he might be able to help in this.

He was; and he made my quest significantly easier by giving me Wilson's telephone number. "He likes visitors," he said. I found this very helpful and encouraging at the time, but I subsequently wondered if this was a bit of a friendly dig at Wilson. In any case, I had the number and would call it.

My exact itinerary is hazy. I intended to get to Penzance and from there walk the coastal path toward Land's End. Two of the megalithic sites I wanted to see – the Merry Maidens and the Pipers – were in that area. And according to my ordnance survey map, there were other, smaller sites that I should be able to find. I had read Alfred Watkins's *The Old Straight Track* and was looking forward to following any ley lines I could discover. But there was one sacred site that I wanted to visit before Cornwall. This was Glastonbury, in Somerset.

I had read about Glastonbury in John Michel's books, and in other books about "Earth magic". I had also read Geoffrey Ashe's books, *King Arthur's Avalon: The Story of Glastonbury*, *The Quest for Arthur's Britain*, *Camelot and the Vision of Albion*, and also his interesting mystical novel, *The Finger and the Moon*. I knew he lived in Glastonbury in the house that the magician Dion Fortune, one of the Golden Dawn, had lived in. It was a site that no self-respecting seeker of the miraculous could pass up.

I have never attended the Glastonbury Festival, but since that first visit 40 years ago, I have been to Glastonbury at least twice more, once to speak at a Dion Fortune symposium. But my first impressions of it remain strong. To get there I had

LEFT: Colin Wilson at home in Cornwall. **BELOW:** Glastobury Tor and the ruins of St Michael's Church.

hitchhiked part of the way and also took a coach; I remember reading Ian Wilson's *The Turin Shroud* for part of the journey. At a bulletin board in the town centre – it was already a New Age crossroads, with metaphysical bookshops offering crystals and tarot readings lining the street – I saw a notice for a room. It was in the vicarage and proved to be comfortable and cheap.

I spent three days in Glastonbury. I visited the remains of a prehistoric lake village not far out of town. In ancient times, the area was flooded and the people then built dwellings on mounds rising out of the water; all that remains now are the mounds. I walked to Wearyall Hill, where legend has it that Joseph of Arimathea – said to have brought the Holy Grail to Glastonbury – rested and where his staff miraculously blossomed into the Glastonbury Thorn. I lingered in the gardens of Chalice Well – where Geoffrey Ashe lived – and drank from its healing waters. And I wandered through the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey, which was destroyed during the dissolution of the monasteries during the reign of Henry VIII. Legend has it that the abbey was founded by Joseph of Arimathea and that the grave of King Arthur can be found in its grounds (according to Geoffrey Ashe, Glastonbury was Avalon).

I can remember sitting in a café across from the abbey, reading, when a woman who was sitting with a group at a table nearby, came up to me and smiled. She then looked at me and asked: "Are you a seeker, too?" I guess I gave that impression. Perhaps whatever I was reading suggested it. She was travelling with a religious society, and, like myself, visiting different sacred sites. Was I a seeker? I guess I was.

MARK HARDING / CREATIVE COMMONS

Like everyone else who comes to Glastonbury, I walked the spiral path to the top of the Tor, where stands the ruins of St Michael's Church, erected in the 14th century on the grounds of an earlier church from the 11th century. St Michael's, like Glastonbury Abbey, was destroyed during the dissolution of the monasteries, but its roofless tower remains and is a site of pilgrimage. I made mine on a very hot afternoon, passing the ancient oaks Gog and Magog, who rivalled the sequoias in age, on the way. (I was saddened to learn recently that Gog has since died and that Magog is also ailing.)

I reached the top and took in the view, then sat within the tower and meditated – which basically meant keeping quiet – for some time. It is difficult to put myself back into the psyche of my younger self. The 40 years between us is quite a stretch, but I know that I was hopeful that *something*, some kind of magic would happen. That is why we go on these sorts of journeys: with the "adventurous expectancy" – as HP Lovecraft calls it – that something out of the ordinary will be revealed to us. What that may be is unknown, but we travel with the faith that we will stumble across it, whatever it is.

THE WOMAN WAS TRACING THE TOP OF THE TOR WITH A FORKED BRANCH. SHE WAS DOWSING

What I stumbled upon when I left the tower was a woman, of mature years, slowly tracing the top of the Tor with a forked branch in her hands. She was dowsing. Colin Wilson had written about this strange ability we possess to detect subterranean water, as well as other substances, and I had carried out my own experiments with a pendulum, after reading TC Lethbridge (see **FT280:22, 415:37**). I watched her for a while and when she noticed me she asked if I would like to give it a try. I did. I took the branch, one end in each hand, and slowly took a few steps. For a few minutes nothing happened. Then I felt it. The branch jerked up, then down. I did nothing; it moved on its own. The woman was not surprised. "It always happens," she said, as I handed the branch back to her.

* * *

I had been in Penzance a few days before I rang the telephone number the owner of the Village Bookshop had given me. There was a heatwave that summer, and in my book *Dreaming Ahead of Time*, I recount how, while walking the coastal path in the blistering sun, I fell into a kind of trance, gazing at the coloured stones in a shallow tidepool. There was no one else on the path and I can't say how long I sat there, absolutely content, looking through the transparent water. On another hike, my ordnance survey map informed me that, just at the top of the cliff above me, I should find some standing stones. I scrambled my way up, feeling myself a genuine ley-hunter, only to find no stones but many standing cows.

Yet other outings were more successful. I did reach the Pipers and the Merry Maidens. I spent some time sitting with my back against one of the Maidens, who legend says were young girls turned to stone as punishment for dancing on the Sabbath. Although I very much wanted to, I can't say that I felt anything unusual, any telluric tingle, certainly nothing like my experience of dowsing on Glastonbury Tor. Yet the long walk back under the stars, to my room at the remarkably cheap bed and breakfast, was magical enough.

When I finally called the telephone number, the voice on the other end was polite and friendly. It seemed the owner of the Village Bookshop was right – Wilson did like visitors, or, at least he gave the impression he did. The easiest thing, he said, was to get the train to St Austell, where he could pick me up. It was, in fact, Joy Wilson, Colin's wife, who met me. I imagine she had greeted Colin's visitors this way more than once.

When we arrived at Tetherdown, set back off the road by a long driveway and with the English Channel not far in the distance, Colin greeted me warmly. I met his young sons, Damon and Rowan – I would meet his daughter, Sally, on another visit – and was surprised to see that his mother was there. The heatwave was still on, and after some lunch, Colin invited me to join him and the others for a swim at the beach. Before this, he had handed me a typescript of his

ABOVE: The Merry Maidens stone circle near St Buryans, Cornwall. Legend says they were 19 young girls turned to stone as punishment for dancing on a Sunday.

CHRISTOPHER BARNARD / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

book on Jung, which he said he had just finished. I decided to stay behind and read the typescript, which I did while sitting in the living room with his mother. I remember her remarking on the many books Colin had written. "But I haven't read any of them," she added.

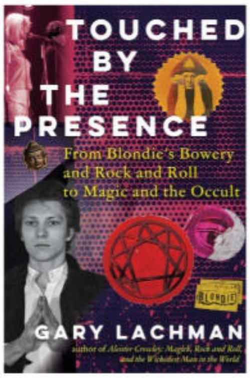
As I've mentioned elsewhere, I was impressed with the number of books lining the walls. They were everywhere – bookshelves were in every room, including the kitchen – as were stacks of VHS tapes, cassettes, and LPs. Aside from a well-stocked second-hand bookshop or a public library, I hadn't seen that many in one place before. Estimates today of the number of books in Colin's library are between 60,000 and 100,000. In addition to the books in the house, he had built two sheds to accommodate the overflow. And the chalet were I stayed, set back from the main house, was also filled with books – old paperbacks and complete sets of Sir Walter Scott, Havelock Ellis, and others – that filled the air with that peculiar odour of slowly disintegrating paper. Damp was unavoidable, being so near the sea. Over my many subsequent visits, I would get to know that musty scent very well.

That evening, after dinner, Colin spoke with me about his ideas about consciousness and what Husserl meant by "intentionality". I remember him saying that if he performed a certain mental exercise, he could create in himself a mild version of what Huxley felt under the effects of mescaline. As the wine flowed and Colin spoke in that full, warm voice he had worked hard to develop – long ago jettisoning his broad Leicester accent – I felt I could understand what he meant and decided that this was something I'd like to do myself. My experiences of "seeing" were already something like it. I would, it seemed, have to get a better grasp of phenomenology.

We drank a lot of wine that evening. Colin must have made an exception to the rule that I subsequently came to understand: that he usually went to bed relatively early, around nine o'clock, because his day usually started at six am. I know we were at it late because at around midnight, Muz Murray, an old friend whom Colin hadn't seen in years, turned up with an attractive younger woman.[4] Colin very graciously put them up as well. By that time, I was feeling the effects of travel, wine, and sitting across from one of the most important writers of the 20th century. I had argued with David Bowie, gotten drunk with Iggy Pop, and Debbie Harry had ironed my skinny ties, but if I was ever starstruck it was then, getting through a bottle or two with the man whose work had changed my life.

Yet one exact quote from that evening I can recount. I had talked about my interest in Wilson's ideas with some of my Fourth Way workmates in Los Angeles, and the general feeling was that, after *The Outsider*, Wilson had taken too intellectual a route and that his work suffered from that. I disagreed with this, and when I mentioned the 'Gurdjieffian' attitude to his ideas, Wilson stopped. "Well," he said, " I can tell you the Wilsonian response to that: fuck off." I would not put it in quite those terms myself, but I could see what he meant.

The above article is an edited excerpt from Gary Lachman's memoir *Touched By The Presence: From Blondie's Bowery and Rock and Roll to Magic and the Occult* (Inner Traditions, 2025), now available in the UK. For Gary's interview with Colin Wilson, see **FT188:40-43**; and his obituary of Colin, see **FT310:24-25**.


TOUCHED BY THE PRESENCE
From Blondie's Bowery and Rock and Roll to Magic and the Occult
GARY LACHMAN
author of Aleister Crowley: Magick, Rock and Roll, and the Wickedest Man in the World

NOTES

1 An account of what that was like can be found in my book *Maurice Nicoll: Forgotten Teacher of the Fourth Way* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2024).

2 When the portly editor Orage arrived at Gurdjieff's institute, he was given a shovel and told to dig a hole, only to fill it in. He did for several days, until he wondered what madhouse he had entered. One day, having forced himself to dig once again, he suddenly found himself filled with an influx of energy, that not only made the digging easy, but *enjoyable*.

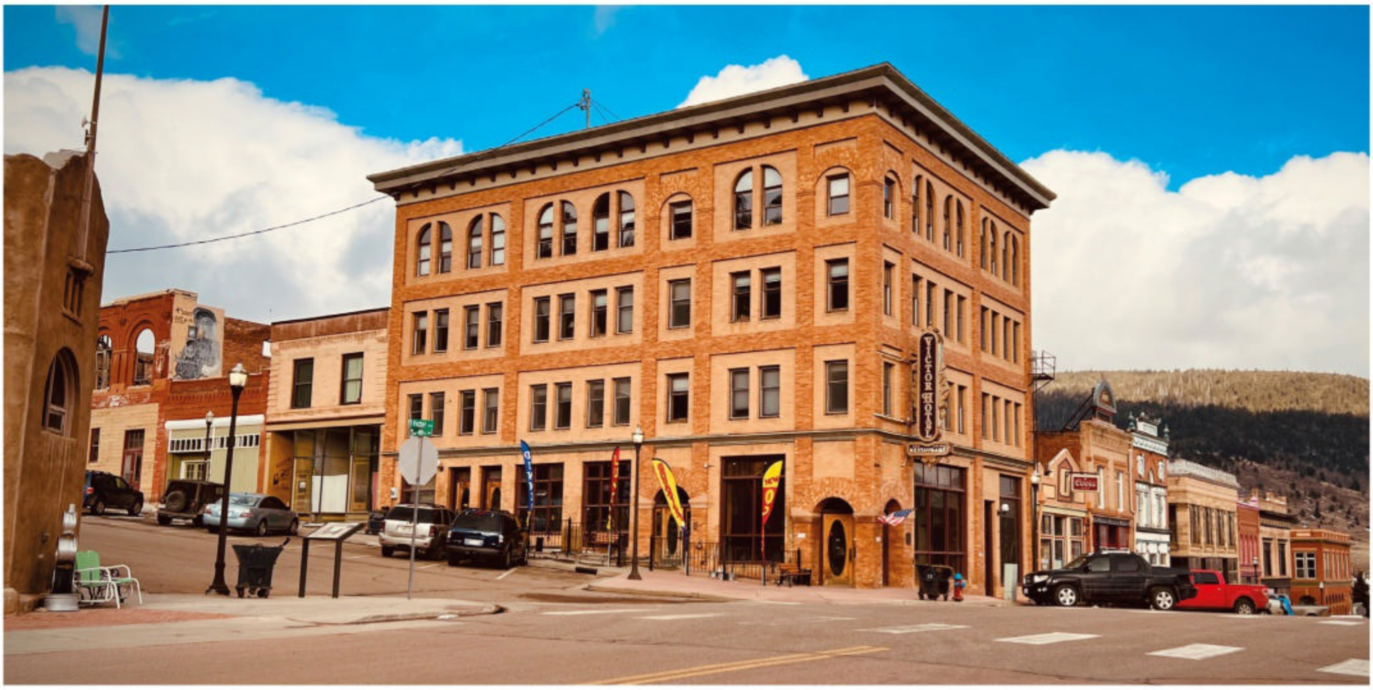
3 While in London, before crossing the Channel, I attended a lecture by PL Travers, author of the Mary Poppins books, and a devotee of the Work, at the College of Psychic Sciences. Her topic was the symbology of the bee.

4 In the late 1960s, Muz Murray published *Gandalf's Garden*, an early 'new age' magazine that combined psychedelia with an attraction to Tolkien's hobbits. I write about him in *Turn Off Your Mind: The Dedalus Book of the 1960s*.

GARY LACHMAN is a former member of Blondie and a regular contributor to *Fortean Times*. His many books include studies of Gurdjieff, Steiner and Colin Wilson. Recent titles include *Dark Star Rising: Magick and Power in the Age of Trump* (2018) and *Dreaming Ahead of Time: Experiences with Precognitive Dreams, Synchronicity and Coincidence* (2022).

THE LEGENDS OF THE VICTOR HOTEL

As well as long-abandoned mining towns, Colorado's gold rushes left plenty of myths in their wake – including ghost stories. **DR KAREN STOLLZNOW** dared to stay in the Victor Hotel's Room 301 as she went in search of the truth behind Cripple Creek's most famous haunting.



KAREN STOLLZNOW

The wave of gold fever in Cripple Creek-Victor (1893-1910) came decades after Colorado's official gold rush (1858-1861), but it was no less bountiful. Within just a few years, the area had transformed into one of the fastest growing and most lucrative gold districts in the world. Years later, the area would also become the backdrop for one of Colorado's most enduring ghost stories.

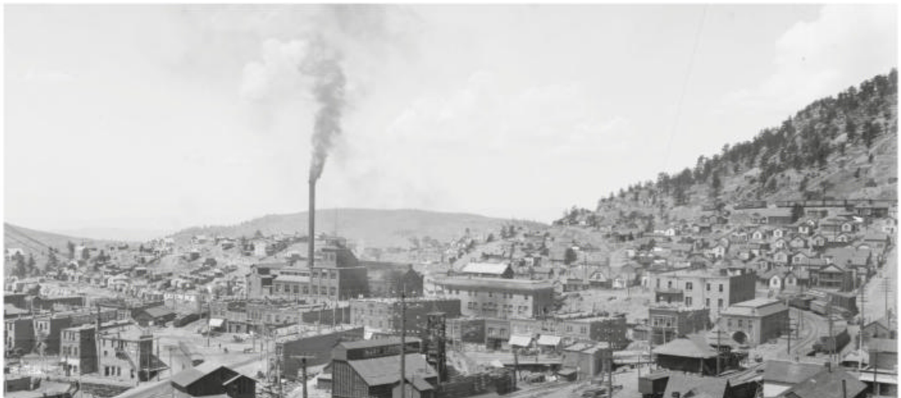
GOLD AND GHOSTS

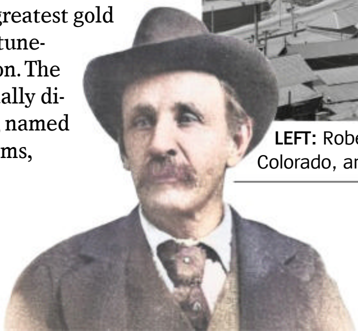
Perched in the Rockies at over 10,000 feet (3,048m) above sea level, the region took off when a cowboy-turned-prospector named Robert Womack struck gold in a place ironically known as Poverty Gulch.[1] Womack tried to spread the word, but thanks to a previous hoax in the area, and his own reputation for heavy drinking, gambling, and parlor-house antics, few took him seriously. Dubbed "Crazy Bob" for his erratic behavior, he was easy to dismiss, at least at first.

Others soon caught wind of Womack's discovery and it ignited the greatest gold rush in Colorado history. Fortune-seekers poured into the region. The area quickly boomed, eventually dividing into two towns: Victor, named after early settler Victor Adams, and Cripple Creek, so-called for the livestock that often became injured crossing a nearby stream. Nicknamed the "City of Gold Mines," the region boasted some 500 mines that yielded over 21 million ounces (595,000kg) of gold. The rush made many people rich, minting more than a few millionaires. (And no, that figure isn't adjusted for inflation.)

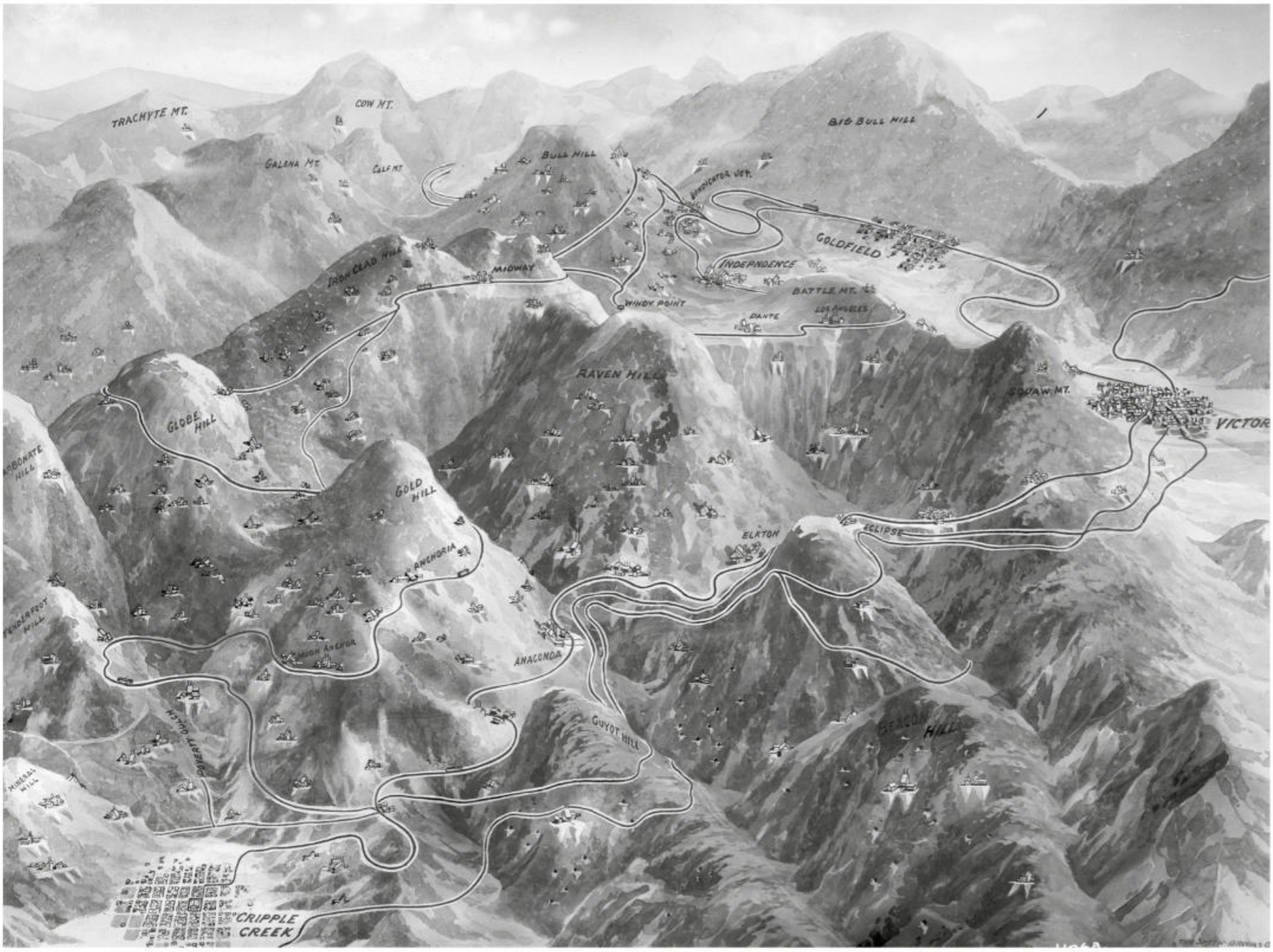
THESE DAYS, VISITORS COME NOT FOR GOLD, BUT FOR HISTORY AND GHOST STORIES

Like many Wild West boomtowns, Victor





LEFT: Robert Womack, whose discovery started Colorado's greatest gold rush. **ABOVE:** Victor, Colorado, and the Gold Coin Mine around 1900. **TOP:** The Victor Hotel today.



ABOVE: A map showing Teller County mining towns and railways, including Cripple Creek and Victor. Poverty Gulch, Mineral Hill, Guyot Hill, Anaconda, Elkton and Raven Hill are among the mines and features shown on the map. **BELOW:** A disused mine near Victor as it looks today.

was built on dreams, but shadowed by disaster. In 1899, a fire tore through the town, reducing it to ashes in just five hours. Victor was quickly rebuilt (there was still gold in them thar hills), but no sooner had the dust settled than a smallpox epidemic swept through the population. Between disease, disaster, and the daily dangers of mining, tragedy became woven into the fabric of life. And where there's tragedy, ghost stories are rarely far behind.

The gold rush dwindled, but it never truly ended. Mining still takes place in the region, though the towns are far quieter than they once were. Cripple Creek reinvented itself as one of Colorado's most popular gambling destinations, while Victor teeters on the edge of becoming a ghost town, its streets lined with empty storefronts and faded Victorian homes. These days, visitors come not for gold, but for history, folklore, and ghost stories. Many of those stories centre on the infamous Victor Hotel, where, as the legend goes, some guests checked in but never checked out.

Let's dig into the legends surrounding the Victor Hotel, a place said to have more than a few lingering guests, and one story that stands out above the rest.

THE VICTOR HOTELS

The Victor Hotel was built twice. The original structure, erected in 1894 by brothers Frank and Harry Woods, was a wooden building that fell victim to the devastating fire of 1899. [2] Undeterred, the pair rebuilt, this time with brick and stone. One of its most distinctive features was a "bird cage" elevator, an ornate, open-cab design that was rare in Colorado at the time and is still in operation today. The building served both as a hotel and a commercial hub, but it had a curious and macabre distinction: the fourth floor was reportedly used as a makeshift morgue during the brutal winters, when the ground was too frozen to dig graves. It's said the bodies were kept there until the spring thaw made burial possible.

Over the decades, the Victor Hotel has remained a going concern, housing not only guests but also a variety of businesses, including banks, a restaurant, a jeweller, a grocery store, and a telephone company. The hotel is still open today, though many of its guests are less interested in a good night's sleep than in chasing ghosts. Renting a room on the fourth floor gives new meaning to the expression to "sleep like the dead." Visitors hope to catch glimpses of misty apparitions – said to be doctors, nurses, and patients – and report shuffling sounds, loud bangs, disembodied voices, and eerie footsteps. The third floor has its hauntings too. Apparitions of dishevelled miners have been seen roaming the hallways, leading some guests to assume there's a historical re-enactment in town.

Guests have reported personal items going missing, the phantom smell of perfume or cigar smoke, and capturing strange lights and hazy shapes in photographs taken around the hotel. Staff have experienced their share of odd occurrences too, including classic poltergeist activity. In the hotel's small diner downstairs, knives have reportedly flown across the kitchen, and cabinet doors are said to slam shut on their own. Some accounts mention the presence of a mischievous child, a little boy who moves guests' belongings, or turns lights on and off. Others claim to have seen a friendly ghost dubbed "Charlie," described as an older gentleman wearing a cowboy hat, faded jeans, and a tartan shirt. The ghost of

STEVE KRULL MOUNTAIN SCENERY IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK

PHOTOS: KAREN STOLLZNOW

ABOVE: The Victor Hotel's notorious Room 301, where 'Eddy' is reputed to have stayed; guests report phantom voices, knockings and footsteps. **BELOW:** The antique lift said to travel on its own between the lobby and the third floor. Eddy is said to have fallen down the elevator shaft to his death.

a young woman is sometimes spotted in the lobby, even on nights when no one is checked in. And then there's the elevator, the hotel's slow-moving, antique lift said to travel between the third floor and the lobby on its own, with no one inside and when no button was pressed.

But of all the hotel's ghostly activity, its most famous resident is said to be a miner named Eddy.

ROOM 301

Eddy, sometimes spelled "Eddie," is said to have been a miner who boarded at the Victor Hotel while working in the nearby mines during the gold rush. He stayed in Room 301. One fateful morning, Eddy left early to head to work. Wearing his heavy steel-toed boots, he approached the elevator and pressed the button, but when the iron gates opened, there was no car. Unaware, he stepped out into empty space and "fell to his death" down the elevator shaft.[3] Eddy's body was later retrieved and stored in the morgue on the fourth floor until he could be buried.

Ever since Eddy's tragic death, guests staying in Room 301 have reported strange phenomena: phantom footsteps, disembodied voices, and eerie knockings throughout the night. Some say they've seen a shadowy figure sitting on the bed or standing near the window. Others speak of being awoken by the sound of heavy footsteps pacing the hallway, yet when they open the door, no one is there. Lights flicker, the air grows inexplicably cold, and some claim to see fleeting reflections of a miner's face in the mirror. According to legend, the elevator never stops on the second or fourth floors, only the third, where Eddy once stayed… and where some believe he still does.

There are several versions of the story. Some accounts claim the accident happened after a long shift, when Eddy, exhausted, tried to take the elevator down to the lobby. Others suggest it was evening, and that he was intoxicated, a drunkard who misjudged his step after one drink too many.

AS NIGHT WORE ON, MORE GUESTS ARRIVED, AND WITH THEM CAME THE GHOST HUNTERS

When I began to uncover these conflicting versions, which are usually a hallmark of urban legend, I started to suspect that this was folklore, not fact.

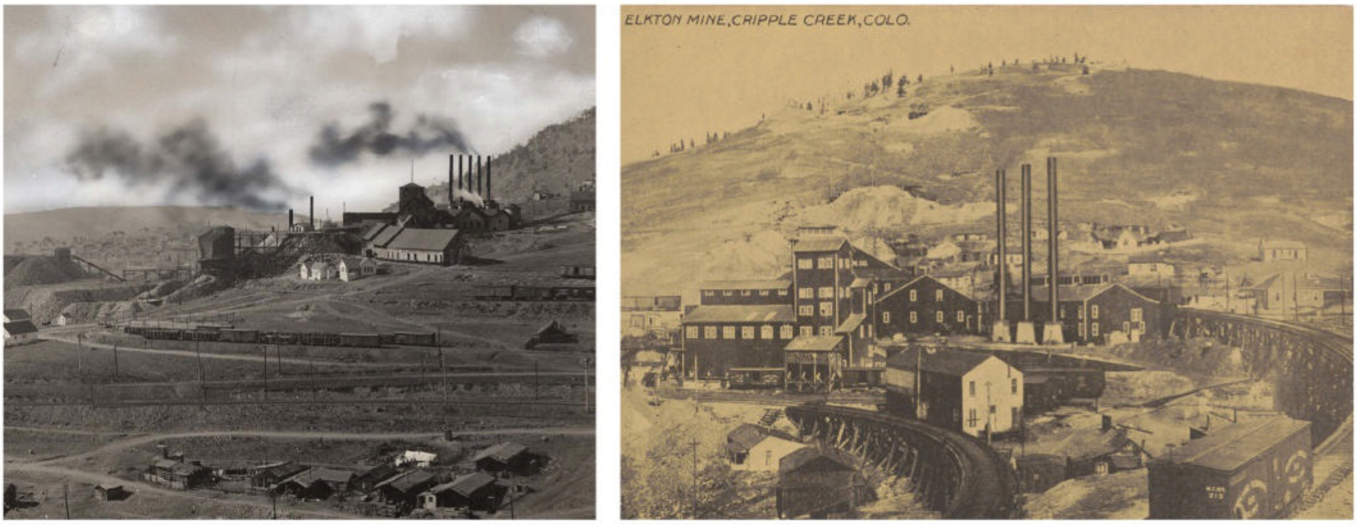
GHOST HUNTERS

Drawn by these stories, I planned a trip to the area, staying at the Victor Hotel, and in Room 301, no less. In its heyday, Victor boasted a population of over 18,000. Today, that number has dwindled to around 400, a small but dedicated community. A few pubs, a bakery, gift shops, churches, and a museum service residents and visitors, but for most necessities, people make the short trip to Victor's more affluent sister, Cripple Creek. Among the original buildings still standing is the Victor Hotel. The old Victorian structure retains much of its Wild West charm, though it has undergone restoration in recent years.

When I arrived in Victor, it was winter, the day was cold, overcast, and it was starting to snow. A light dusting had already settled on the streets, and the wind was picking up. The town felt quiet and half-abandoned, with only a few businesses open and hardly anyone in sight. Inside the hotel, there was no one at the check-in desk, and everything was handled via text message. The lobby was decorated with antique furniture, giving it a vintage charm, though the rest of the building had been updated with modern conveniences. The infamous elevator wasn't working, so I hauled my bag up the stairs to the third floor and found Room 301.

At first, the hotel was empty. But as the night wore on, more guests arrived, and with them came the ghost hunters. Before long, the halls were buzzing with the sounds of EMF detectors and muffled chatter. Guests stayed up into the early hours, sweeping the halls with cameras, whispering into voice recorders, and hoping to capture electronic voice phenomena (EVP) from Eddy.

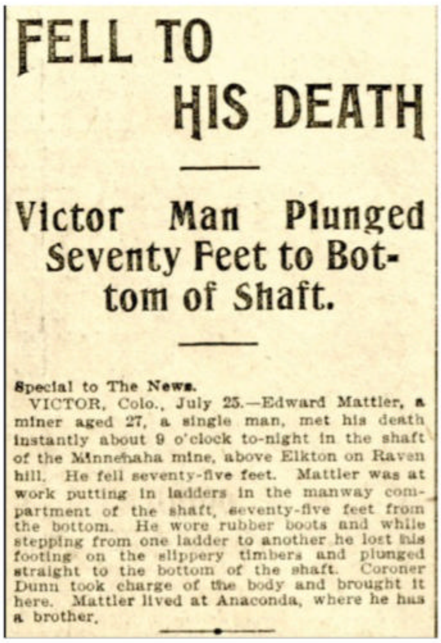
For my own research, I don't rely on EMF readers or Geiger counters; I use the historical method. This means gathering and analysing evidence to build a clearer picture of what happened in the past. That evidence might come from primary sources, like old



ABOVE: Independence Mine, where Edward Twiggs died in a hoisting accident, and Elkton Mine, close to where a man named Edward Mattler plunged to his death – but down a mine shaft, not an elevator shaft. **BELOW:** A report of Mattler's death from the *Rocky Mountain News*, 26 July 1900.

newspapers, photographs, or official records, as well as secondary sources, such as books and articles written by historians. The goal isn't to prove or debunk a haunting, but to understand how a story took shape, and why it endures.

I sat in the hotel lobby with my laptop, where the Wi-Fi signal was strongest, digging into newspaper archives to learn more about the building's history. Through the Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection, I unearthed an intriguing detail: on 29 April 1902, the *Victor Record* reported that Doctors McKenzie and Welles had opened a private hospital on the hotel's fourth floor.[4] Just six months later, tragedy struck. Dr Welles suffered a serious accident when his foot was crushed in the elevator door.[5] He would eventually lose the foot to amputation. So, the building had once housed a hospital, but contrary to local legend, it was never a morgue. The archives also revealed that the elevator had a long history of being unreliable and frequently out of service, just as it was during my stay.



FELL TO HIS DEATH

Victor Man Plunged Seventy Feet to Bottom of Shaft.

Special to The News.

VICTOR, Colo., July 25.—Edward Mattler, a miner aged 27, a single man, met his death instantly about 9 o'clock to-night in the shaft of the Minnehaha mine, above Elkton on Raven hill. He fell seventy-five feet. Mattler was at work putting in ladders in the manway compartment of the shaft, seventy-five feet from the bottom. He wore rubber boots and while stepping from one ladder to another he lost his footing on the slippery timbers and plunged straight to the bottom of the shaft. Coroner Dunn took charge of the body and brought it here. Mattler lived at Anaconda, where he has a brother.

AN ARRAY OF EDWARDS

As for the rest of the hotel's folklore, there wasn't much point in chasing stories about an unnamed ghostly boy, the unidentified woman said to appear in the lobby, or "Charlie" in his cowboy hat. None of them came with enough details to properly investigate. But the story of Eddie and the elevator offered just enough information to dig into. I came across a 2018 interview with long-term resident Tarie Huber (1936-2021), recorded by the Victor Heritage Society.[6] In it, Huber shared a tale passed down from her grandmother about a local man named Eddie McDermott who once lived in Victor. In her version of events, sometime during the 1930s, a drunken Eddie *did* fall down the elevator shaft, but his fall was broken by a stack of boxes, and he survived the ordeal. Huber added that she was "sick of hearing people say McDermott died in the fall," because he didn't die until 1978. But this Eddie doesn't quite fit the ghost story. McDermott wasn't a miner; he was a cattleman and barman. Furthermore, this incident occurred in the 1930s, not during the gold rush era. It seemed to me that this *wasn't* the exact same Eddy.

I wondered if the local cemetery might hold more clues. Armed with nothing more than the name "Eddy," I turned to the website *Find a Grave*, a database of cemetery records from around the world. I searched Victor's Sunnyside Cemetery, narrowing the results by time period, and looking for anyone named Edward. At first, there seemed to be several possible contenders. One was Edward G Lane, who died in 1905, but it turned out that he was a toddler, just shy of three years old. His small headstone reads "Budden on earth to bloom in heaven". Another was Edward Murphy, who died at the age of 28 in 1911, just outside the timeframe I'd been focusing on. There's no newspaper record of his death, which suggests it was uneventful or unremarkable by the standards of the day. And at the time, Colorado was battling outbreaks of cholera, typhoid, scarlet fever, diphtheria, and tuberculosis.

Then there was Edward Twiggs, who seemed to be a more likely candidate. Twiggs was a miner working at the nearby Stratton's Independence Mine and Mill. He was a temporary worker brought in during a union strike, and in 1904, he was involved in a fatal hoisting accident. The *Colorado Transcript* reported that at 2.15am on 26 January, 15 men were being hoisted to the surface in a cage.[7] When the cage reached the top, the engineer was unable to stop the engine, and it was pulled into the gallows frame. The strain snapped the cable, and the cage plunged 1,500 feet (457m) down the shaft, killing everyone aboard. Ted "Edward" Twiggs was named among the dead in what was described as the worst accident ever recorded in the district. Still, I doubted this was the "Eddy" of hotel folklore. The accident involved a group of men, and, furthermore, it didn't occur at the Victor Hotel.

Finally, I came across an entry for an Edward Mattler (1873-1900). There were no photographs of the 27-year-old or his headstone. However, the listing included a newspaper clipping from the *Rocky Mountain News* titled: *"FELL TO HIS DEATH—Victor Man Plunged Seventy Feet to Bottom of Shaft."*[8] The headline caught my attention… could this be the real Eddy behind the folklore?

However, in reading the full article, the man hadn't fallen to his death in an elevator shaft – he had fallen down a *mining* shaft.

VICTOR, Colo., July 25.—Edward Mattler, a miner aged 27, a single man, met his death instantly about 9 o'clock to-night in the shaft of the Minnehaha mine, above Elkton on Raven hill. He fell seventy-five feet. Mattler was at work putting in ladders in the manway compartment of the shaft, seventy-five feet from the bottom. He wore rubber boots and while stepping from one ladder to another he lost his footing on the slippery timbers and plunged straight to the bottom of the shaft. Coroner Dunn took charge of the body and brought it here. Mattler lived at Anaconda, where he has a brother.

The truth was more grounded, and more tragic. Edward hadn't fallen in an elevator

VICTOR
SUNNYSIDE
CEMETERY

KAREN STOLLZNOW

LEFT: Sunnyside Cemetary, Victor, the final resting place of Edward Mattler – although his precise burial location remains unknown.

shaft, but deep into the earth, down a mining shaft. What stood out was that many modern retellings of Eddy's accident use the exact phrase "fell to his death", the same wording used in the newspaper headline. The similarities between the stories were striking: a man named Edward, a fatal fall down a shaft, and a death that occurred in the Victor area during the gold rush. Another article, published in the *Victor Record* that same day, reported that Edward's remains were taken not to a makeshift morgue in the Victor Hotel, as the legend claims, but to the premises of TF Dunn & Co., the local undertaker. [9]

I searched the newspaper archives for more information, but found no further mention of Edward, or his unnamed brother. The town of Anaconda was situated halfway between Victor and Cripple Creek, although it no longer exists as a town, having been destroyed by fire in 1904.[10] Edward Mattler was a miner (one article described him as a "timberman'), not a hotel guest, and he died in a mining accident, not in the elevator of the Victor Hotel. In fact, *no one ever died in that elevator*. Still, it seems likely that the stories of "Eddy" were rooted in this man's death. Like a game of Chinese Whispers, the details have shifted over time, until the mine became a hotel, the mining shaft became an elevator shaft, and the man became a ghost.

SUNNYSIDE CEMETERY

On a frigid winter day, I visited Victor's Sunnyside Cemetery in search of Edward Mattler's grave. One of the highest-elevation active cemeteries in the United States, it's a serene place with sweeping views of the surrounding mountains. As snow began to fall, I wrapped my scarf around my face and trudged through the grounds. *Find a Grave* had no record of Edward's burial location, and after a long, cold walk I couldn't find the grave myself. Eventually, I concluded that he probably rests in a pauper's grave in Potter's Field, a quiet patch on the cemetery's edge, marked with scattered small white crosses.

A plaque at its entrance reads: *"Potter's Field – Long, long ago, misfortune deemed this ground Potter's Field. It remains a mystery today why the destitute, possible unbefriended or unknown were buried outside the fence of Sunnyside Cemetery. According to Victorites' memory, such burials took place here until the late 1930s. What markers might have been placed for remembrance have deteriorated and no record exists of burials in this field."*

Standing there in the snow, looking out over the field of unmarked graves, I was struck by how many stories had simply vanished. No headstones, no records – just fading memories and second-hand tales. Edward Mattler is most likely buried here, although his name has long since disappeared from the landscape.

WHERE FACT MEETS FOLKLORE

Eddy, or Edward, then, is unlikely to be haunting the Victor Hotel. He didn't live there, and he didn't die there. The legend appears to be a case of folkloric drift: the way stories shift and adapt as they're passed down through generations over time and shaped by new influences. In this case, modern accounts seem to conflate documented fact and folklore, combining Edward Mattler's fatal mining accident with Edward McDermott's non-fatal elevator mishap, and blending both into the rich history and mythology of the Victor Hotel.

Over the decades, the reality of a man falling down a mine shaft was reimagined as a ghost story centred on the town's only elevator. It was a fitting shift in a place where danger was a constant companion. The newspapers were filled with death: disease, mining accidents, murders, and suicides. In a town shaped by hardship, it's no wonder the line between history and haunting became so easily blurred.

In truth, Edward Mattler wasn't a drunkard, nor the kind of cursed soul that ghost stories so often conjure. He was a young man doing dangerous work in dangerous times, one of many whose lives were cut short in the mines that built the town. I followed the trail of legend back to him, not to debunk a haunting, but to uncover a life; to clear his name, and also to honour his memory.

Edward is long gone. But in a strange way, the ghost stories may have helped keep a part of him alive.

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From chickens to legends

EMMA HOLAHAN celebrates the feathered folklore of the Ditchingham Chicken Roundabout – a legend born on a bypass

I recently found myself wandering through the picturesque landscapes of Suffolk and Norfolk, enticed there by the delights of the 2025 Black Shuck Festival (**FT462:21**). It was here that I stumbled upon a curious sight that made me chuckle, and then reflect: the famous Ditchingham chicken roundabout. This quirky little spot, once a bustling home to a lively flock of feral chickens, has a backstory that's as delightful as it is unusual.

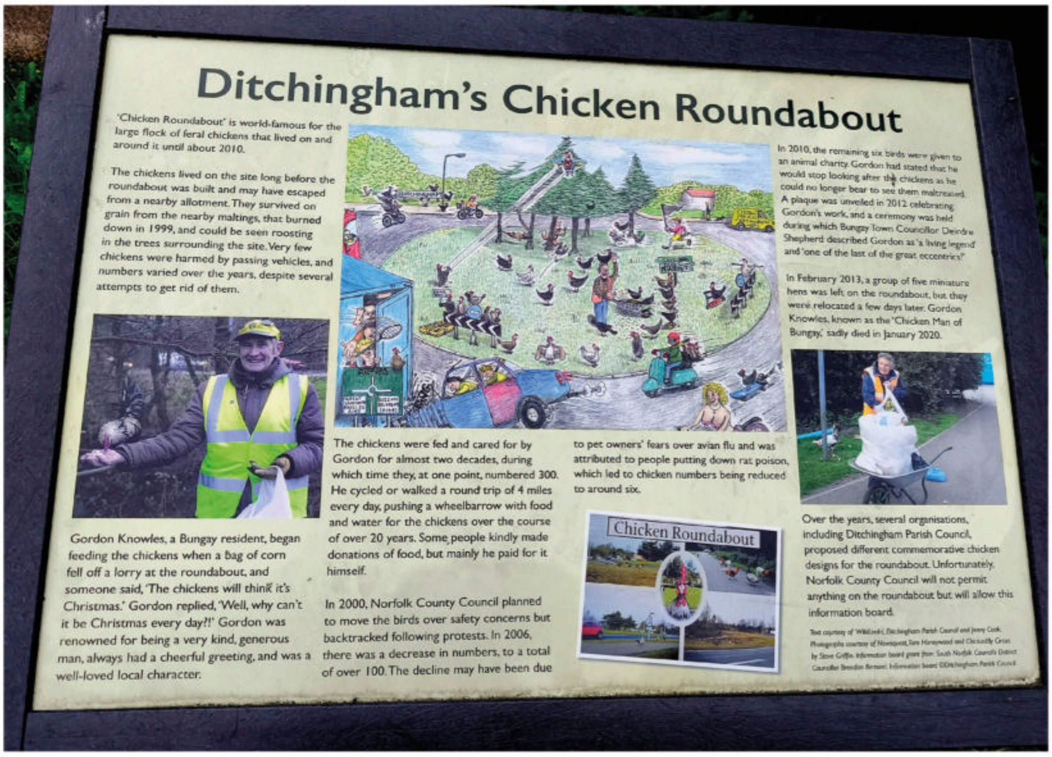
Imagine this: a roundabout – not just a mere nondescript traffic circle, but a vibrant hub of life – where chickens once roamed freely, clucking and scratching about as if they owned the place. It's a scene that sounds unlikely, almost surreal; yet it's a slice of real history that has captured the hearts of locals and visitors alike.

The tale of the Ditchingham chicken roundabout begins long before the roundabout itself was even a twinkle in the planners' eyes. These feathered residents made their home here decades before the bypass and roundabout were constructed, having escaped from a nearby allotment or garden. It's the classic case of chickens taking matters into their own claws! These chickens thrived on the spilled grain from a nearby maltings that, sadly, burned down in 1999. The chickens lived wild, roosting high up in the surrounding trees, an example of avian life surviving on the edge of human activity.

The A134 Bungay bypass was constructed in 1983 and this specific roundabout followed in 1986. The chickens adapted and made their home here. Astonishingly, very few chickens were harmed by passing vehicles, a testimony to their resilience and the care of the local drivers.

A local legend soon emerged: Gordon Knowles, affectionately dubbed "The Ole Chicken Man of Bungay".[1] He became the unofficial, self-appointed caretaker of the roundabout flock. For nearly 20 years, Gordon dedicated himself to the care and feeding of these birds, becoming a beloved figure in the community.

Apparently, his feeding of the flock began in 1991 when a bag of corn accidently fell from a lorry and spilled out its contents for the chickens to feast upon. Someone jokingly remarked: "They think it's Christmas Day," to which Gordan replied, "Let them have



Ditchingham's Chicken Roundabout

'Chicken Roundabout' is world-famous for the large flock of feral chickens that lived on and around it until about 2010.

The chickens lived on the site long before the roundabout was built and may have escaped from a nearby allotment. They survived on grain from the nearby maltings, that burned down in 1999, and could be seen roosting in the trees surrounding the site. Very few chickens were harmed by passing vehicles, and numbers varied over the years, despite several attempts to get rid of them.

Gordon Knowles, a Bungay resident, began feeding the chickens when a bag of corn fell off a lorry at the roundabout, and someone said, 'The chickens will think it's Christmas.' Gordon replied, 'Well, why can't it be Christmas every day?!' Gordon was renowned for being a very kind, generous man, always had a cheerful greeting, and was a well-loved local character.

The chickens were fed and cared for by Gordon for almost two decades, during which time they, at one point, numbered 300. He cycled or walked a round trip of 4 miles every day, pushing a wheelbarrow with food and water for the chickens over the course of over 20 years. Some people kindly made donations of food, but mainly he paid for it himself.

In 2000, Norfolk County Council planned to move the birds over safety concerns but backtracked following protests. In 2006, there was a decrease in numbers, to a total of over 100. The decline may have been due to pet owners' fears over avian flu and was attributed to people putting down rat poison, which led to chicken numbers being reduced to around six.

In 2010, the remaining six birds were given to an animal charity. Gordon had stated that he would stop looking after the chickens as he could no longer bear to see them maltreated. A plaque was unveiled in 2012 celebrating Gordon's work, and a ceremony was held during which Bungay Town Councillor Deirdre Shepherd described Gordon as 'a living legend' and 'one of the last of the great eccentrics.'

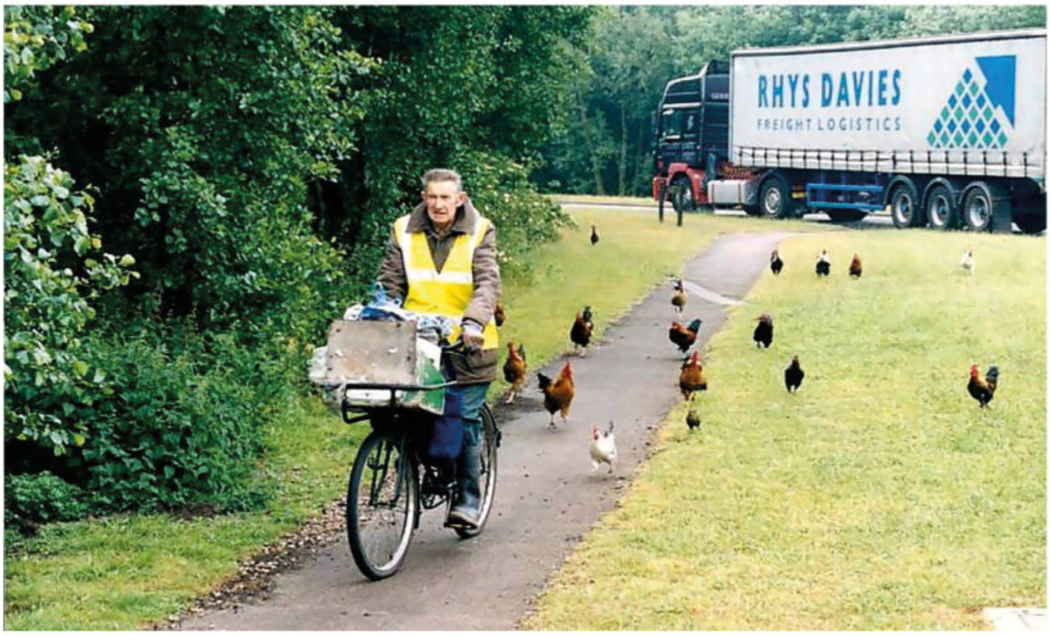
In February 2013, a group of five miniature hens was left on the roundabout, but they were relocated a few days later. Gordon Knowles, known as the 'Chicken Man of Bungay,' sadly died in January 2020.

Over the years, several organisations, including Ditchingham Parish Council, proposed different commemorative chicken designs for the roundabout. Unfortunately, Norfolk County Council will not permit anything on the roundabout but will allow this information board.

EMMA HOLAHAN

ASHLEY DACE / CREATIVE COMMONS

TOP: The information panel on the Chicken Roundabout. **ABOVE**: The roundabout in 2010, with a few remaining chickens.



LEFT: "The Ole Chicken Man of Bungay" feeding the chickens in 2001. **BELOW LEFT**: A proposed memorial to the Chicken Roundabout. **BOTTOM**: Gordon Knowles.

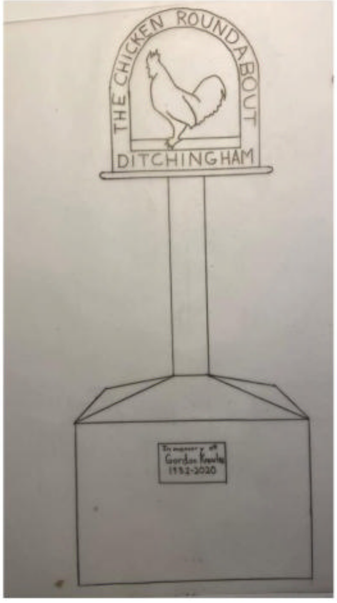
DITCHINGHAM PARISH COUNCIL

Christmas every day!"[2] Every day, come rain or shine, Gordan would cycle or walk a four-mile round trip pushing a wheelbarrow full of food and water for the hungry birds, funded mainly from his own pocket.

His commitment was remarkable; at one point, the chicken population swelled to around 300 birds. Can you imagine the cacophony of clucks and flaps? It must have been a sight to behold, a paradise for poultry in the heart of Ditchingham.

Gordon's efforts transformed the roundabout into a local landmark, a place where people would stop, smile, and perhaps snap a photo or two. The chickens became a symbol of community spirit, a reminder that kindness can flourish in the most unexpected places.

Sadly, there were tough times ahead for the roundabout chickens. In 2000, Norfolk County Council planned to move the chickens away, citing safety concerns. However, the community rallied and protested, demanding the birds remain and the plans were quietly dropped. Further into the decade, locals reported that they thought the chickens were being systematically stolen and sold. By 2006, numbers began to rally again, to over 100, as fears around avian flu meant pet owners abandoned hens at the roundabout. In the following years the flock declined significantly; this was attributed to people feeding them rat poison or birds being stolen.



Sadly, there were tough times ahead for the rounabout chickens...

In 2010 Gordon Knowles eventually made the difficult decision to stop looking after the remaining chickens, saying he could no longer bear to see them maltreated. The remaining six birds were relocated to an animal charity to give them the chance of a peaceful life.

Efforts to memorialise the Chicken Roundabout and Gordon Knowles have faced numerous challenges. In 2012, a plaque was unveiled to celebrate Knowles, described by Bungay town councillor Deirdre Shepherd as "a living legend"[3] for the dedication with which he had cared for the chickens for nearly two decades. That same year, a campaign was launched for chicken statues, but plans for the 'Chicken of the East' statue were blocked by Ditchingham Parish Council in 2013 over safety concerns. More recently, in 2023, another campaign was initiated for statues, but Norfolk County Council has repeatedly rejected proposals for permanent memorials on the roundabout. However, one concession has been made by allowing an information board. Since 2017, the Parish Council has supported local efforts to honour the Chicken Roundabout, yet safety objections from the Highway Department continue to scupper progress. Despite these setbacks, the legacy of the Chicken Roundabout and Gordon Knowles remains close to the hearts of the local community.

Though the chickens have since been relocated, their legacy continues to bring joy to the area. The traffic island now stands as a tribute to their whimsical charm, a reminder of the time when feathered friends ruled the roundabout. Locals often reminisce about the days when they would see Gordon tending to his flock, a smile on his face as he scattered grain for his beloved birds.

The Ditchingham chicken roundabout is more than just a traffic feature – it's a slice of modern-day folklore. It embodies the spirit of community, kindness, and the extraordinary tales that can emerge from the everyday. In a world that often feels rushed and impersonal, the chicken roundabout serves as a gentle reminder to slow down and appreciate the connections between people, animals, and the stories that bind us together.

For more feral chickens in Norfolk (Snettisham), see **FT452:6-7**.

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Gordon Knowles

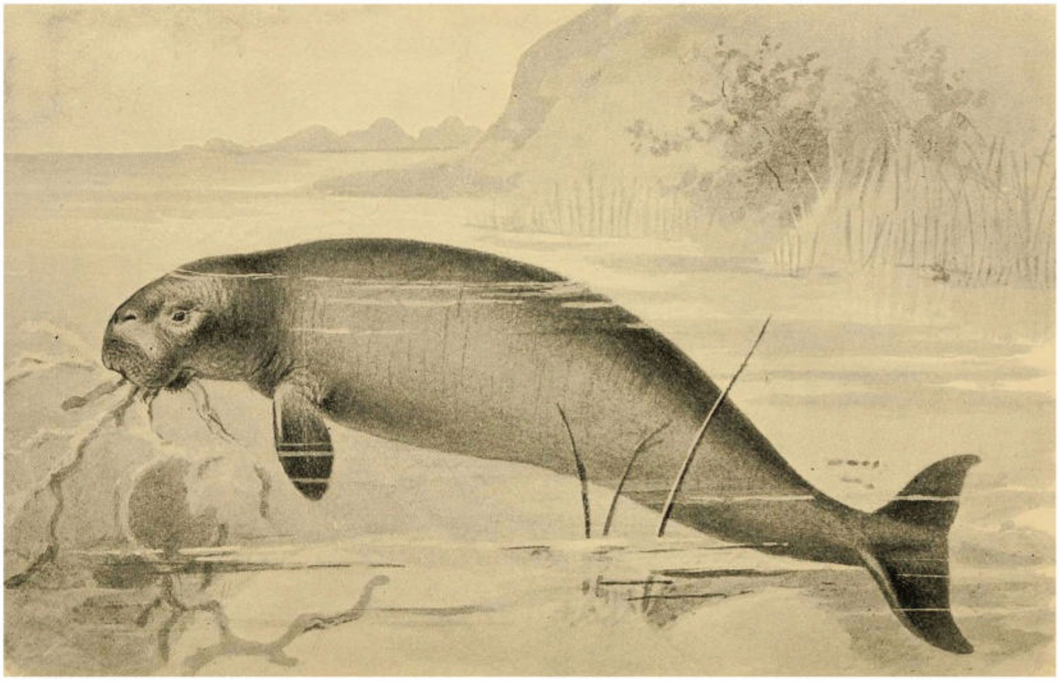
Sea cow survivors?

Did Steller's sea cow, supposedly extinct since 1768, survive off the Kamchatka Peninsula, where it was seen by Captain Cook, asks **ULRICH MAGIN**

On 4 November 1741 the Russian ship *Svyatoy Pyotr* (St Peter), under the command of Vitus Bering, was stranded with its crew of 28 hands on Bering Island, the most western of the Commander Islands off the Kamchatka Peninsula in the Bering Sea. The people began to die of scurvy until the ship's doctor, German born Georg Wilhelm Steller, advised them to eat seaweed: as a result, they regained their strength, built a boat and returned to Russia in 1742.

Steller's main claim to fame, however, is his description of the island's most unusual inhabitant: the 30ft (9m) long Steller's sea cow, a giant arctic relative of the dugongs and manatees. It certainly was a magnificent creature. Not beautiful in the common sense of the word; it was rather slow and sluggish, but also large, herbivorous and peaceful. Too peaceful for man.

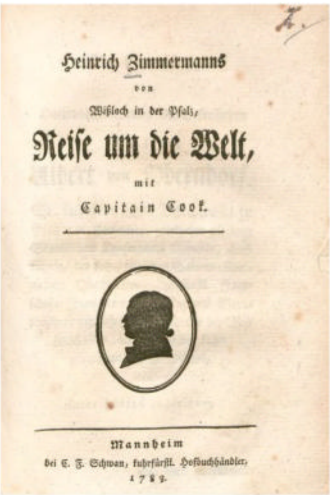
Within a few years of its discovery, Steller's sea cow had been completely exterminated; as it didn't try to escape, it was easy prey for the crews of ships desperate for fresh meat. A Czarist official wrote in 1754: "One giant sea cow provides 33 people sufficient meat for a whole month." So the poor animals, utterly unable to defend themselves, quickly ended up in the cooking pots of ships from Russia and eleswhere. It is generally accepted that the last specimens were killed for meat by a certain fur hunter called Popov and his companion in 1768. This is the date accepted by zoological wisdom. (Akimuschkin, 1988, p.52)



The idea that man wiped out this species in a few years is uncomfortable, and so there have since been more recent sightings, some far from the usual habitat:

Take the sea cow, 9ft (2.7m) in length, and weighing 203kg (448lb) that was captured "off Tairoa" and brought up to Auckland in June 1874 by the steamer *Southern Cross*. It was meant for exhibition, although what became of it is unknown. (*Daily Southern Cross*, Auckland, 26 June 1874)

This may have been a stray dugong from New Guinea or something else entirely – some sort of pinniped, for example. In November 1934, it is said that the "Victorian Museum authorities declare that the remains of the sea monster found on a British Columbia island are those of a sea cow, a native to Alaskan waters, which is believed to have been extinct for 170 years." (*New Zealand Herald*, 27 Nov 1934) This was a basking shark. But the two instances show how people like to relate "unusual animal finds" to some unknown large animal – if it is extinct, it's all the more sensational!



Z.

Heinrich Zimmermanns
von
Wißloch in der Pfalz,
Reiſe um die Welt,
mit
Capitain Cook.

Mannheim
bei C. F. Schwan, kuhrfürſtl. Hofbuchhändler,
1781.

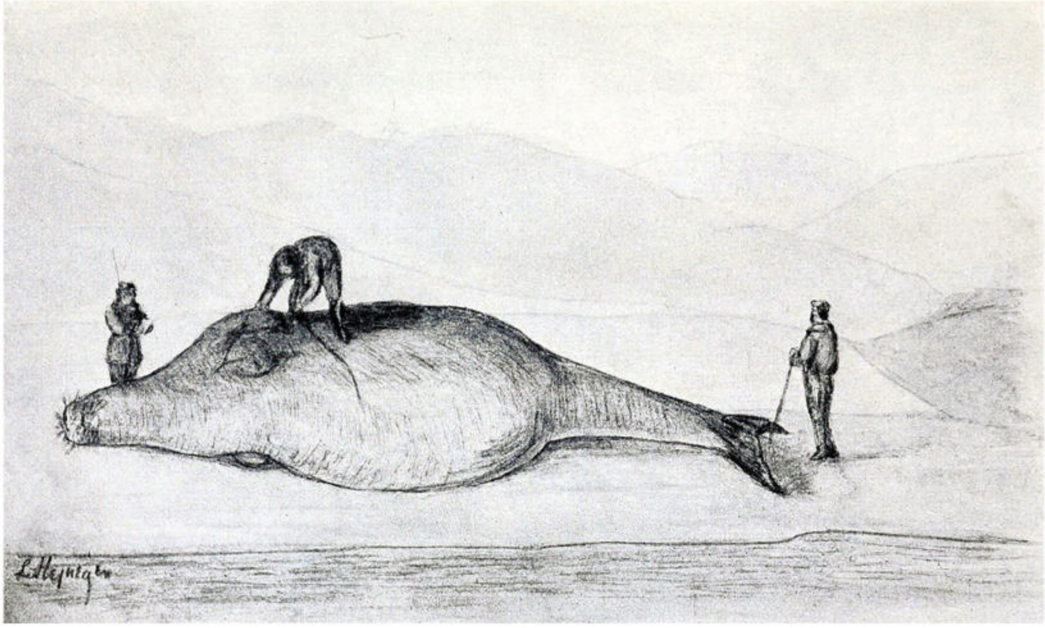
ABOVE: Steller's sea cow. **LEFT**: Sailor Heinrich Zimmermann's 1781 book *Reise um die Welt, mit Capitain Cook* contains hints of sea cow survivors.

However, there have also been more recent stories in 1803, 1806, 1854 and 1910. One was from the Aleutian Islands, the continuation of the Commander Islands, which stretch to Alaska. On 31 October 1921, the Canterbury, New Zealand, *Press* reported:

"The Arctic sea-cow, thought to have been extinct for 40 [!] years, has been seen again. Native fishermen of the Aleutian Islands declare that when fishing off the islands one or more of these creatures have been seen. In the hindquarters they appeared to be true fish, but in the head and neck they were ox-like. The huge sea-cow often weighs 400lb [181kg], and is 40ft [12m] long. Seaweed grows in miniature forests along the Aleutian Islands, and the sea-cows once pastured there. They possessed a habit of herding together like cattle, snorting and puffing."

Another report was made in summer 1962 and is a classic in most cryptozoological books. The crew of the Soviet whaler *Buran* had observed "a group of very large animals of an unusual species" in the north of Kamchatka, close to Cape Navarin at around 64° N in shallow seas where the ground was covered in seaweed. (Akimuschkin 1988, p.53)

These were all contentious observations. Yet there is almost certain evidence that Steller's Sea Cow survived its reputed extinction for at least a decade, and not in the Aleutians or the Command-



LEFT: A reconstruction of Georg Wilhelm Steller measuring a Steller's sea cow on Bering Island, 12 July 1742 by Leonhard Stejneger.

er Islands. One of the witnesses was a world famous sailor, so it is very strange that this has gone unrecorded before.

I found the first previously unnoticed hint of the animal in a book by the sailor Heinrich Zimmermann of Wiesloch, in the Palatinate in Germany, who accompanied Captain Cook on his last voyage with the *Resolution* and *Discovery*. He took notes secretly, as all reporting on the journey was officially prohibited, and later published his diary in form of an entertaining and highly readable book when he returned to his homeland. I came across his work when I was researching a book on forgotten heroes of my home region and had nothing cryptozoological in mind at all.

In 1778, Cook's ships closed in on the Asian coast near Bering Island where the sea cow had been discovered and exterminated. Zimmermann writes (1781, p. 68):

"On August 9th, we landed at 65 degrees north latitude on the Asian coast. The inhabitants there are very similar to the Americans described above [on the shore of Alaska]; only they are of a somewhat browner and darker complexion, they gathered in great numbers with bows and arrows on the coast. In spite of this, Mr Cook went to the country all by himself and befriended them with gifts. Their diet consists of fish and especially sea-cows, and they know how to prepare the skin of these as well as any tanner. The Captain gave this country the name Cookstown."

There was a prominent witness for the survival of Steller's sea cow

On p.103 Zimmermann adds on the occasion of a second stay there in 1779: "In the middle of the month of July we arrived at latitude 71 north and encountered ice in abundance and more than before. Here, as had happened last year on this and the American coast, we again shot many sea horses [walrus], sea-cows, and quite a few fur seals, and boiled oil from them. We cruised in every direction, and where we found an opening, we boldly proceeded."

Of course, Captain Cook also kept a journal, and in it he notes his encounter with sea-cows at Kamchatka in the same very matter-of-fact way. Describing his stay at the Peninsula, he writes:

"The seas and lakes abound with a variety of amphibious animals, of which seals and sea-horses and sea-cows are the most numerous, and the most profitable. From the skins of the seals they make their canoes, and on their flesh and fat they feed deliciously. Whales are sometimes cast upon the shores, but very seldom, unless wounded. With the teeth and bones of the sea-horse and sea cow they point their arrows, and weapons of war; and of their fat and blubber they make their oil. They have otters in their lakes, but their skins bear a great price." (Cook 1781, p.371)

From this it appears that there was a prominent witness for the survival of Steller's sea cow for at least 11 years after its alleged extermination, and in larger numbers. Bering Island lies at 55 degrees North, which means the bays Cook and Zimmermann visited were at least 10 to 16 degrees farther north than the region where the sea cow was assumed to have lived, and on the mainland of Asia.

There was one fact that could be used against this discovery: I found out that until about 1800 the English word "sea-cow" also commonly meant a walrus (Farley Mowat, 1999, p.29-30, shows that it was still used in this sense in 1765 and 1798) so that what Cook was reporting off Kamchatka might just have been walrus. It is a shame that neither Zimmermann nor Cook described, but simply named, the hunted animal. It must have been nothing special for them. I resigned myself to the fact that they were talking about walruses – until I re-read both sources more closely.

Cook mentions sea-cows only once – all other references to 'cows' are to terrestrial ones (pp.122, 345, 347, 348), and while he never mentions walruses, he does refer to "sea-horses" which would have been his name for them. Similarly, Zimmerman says they also hunted "Seerosse" on Kamchatka, which is an alternative German form of "Walross", the German word commonly used for walrus (it translates as 'whale-horse', which is also the origin of the English walrus, and 'Seeross' simply translates as sea-horse, the term Cook used). That is, Zimmermann and Cook document walruses and sea-cows in the same sentence. Therefore, their sea-cows cannot have been walrus unless their sea-horses were *not* walrus, which I do not believe.

While doubt still lingers, there is a real chance that some Steller's sea cows outlived other individuals of the species on the Kamchatka coast (in a very large geographical area, from 65 to 71 degrees north, and in multitudes, not as a few surviving animals) for at least a dozen years. Or more? As nobody expected sea cows to be found farther north than Bering Island, perhaps they remained there in safety… until the last, lonely survivors were spotted in 1962?

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ULRICH MAGIN is a longtime FT contributor and writes the magazine's regular 'Strange Continent' column. He is the author of *Investigating the Impossible* (2011) and lives in Germany.

The Ghastling

A biannual magazine of ghost stories,
folk horror, the macabre and the oh-so-strange. *For those that dwell in the darkness...*
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THEGHASTLING.COM

Black magic and psychic detectives

From Edward Bulwer-Lytton to Dion Fortune, via Haggard, Machen, Le Fanu and even Crowley, **Roger Luckhurst** examines the 19th- and early 20th-century beginnings of the occult, esoteric best-seller

Open Secrets

The Popular Fiction of Britain's Occult Revival, 1842-1936

Christine Ferguson

Oxford University Press 2025
Hb, 248pp, £64, ISBN 9780197651599

Open Secrets is an academic study of that paradoxical object: the occult, esoteric best-seller. These works fictionalised hieratic, arcane knowledge for a new mass market readership. Initiates enter secret societies, dastardly black magic is enacted, elixirs sought, souls transmigrated, or crimes solved by psychic detectives.

These books occupied that space of hesitancy between fiction and the alluring possibility of fact: what if the modern city really did conceal epic spiritual battles of good and evil behind the façades of its bland streets? That allure still sells in dark urban fantasy today.

Christine Ferguson dates this multiform genre from Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1842 novel, *Zanoni*, a sensational account of an occult education by London's then leading novelist, politician, occultist and bounder.

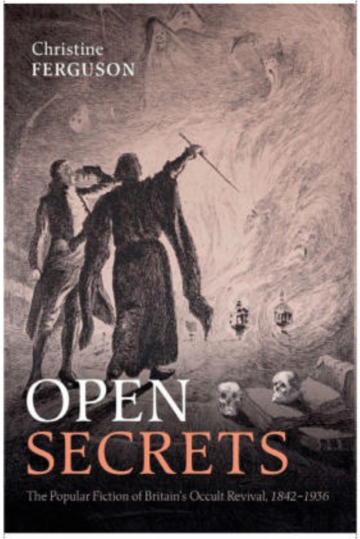
She closes her study with Dion Fortune's *The Goat Foot God* (1936), an embrace of paganism by the founder of the Society of the Inner Light and author of a famous practical guide on how to avoid psychic attacks by your magical enemies.

In between, Ferguson visits the trend for reincarnation romances in the 1880s, inspired in part by the influx of Eastern thought via the Theosophical Society.

Rider Haggard's *She* is the most famous of these, but Ferguson also looks at the neglected big sellers of that era by Marie Corelli and Mabel Collins. Corelli, largely forgotten now, massively outsold her fellow authors with a strange mix of Eastern exoticism and mystical Christianity (she called it her "Electric Creed"), yet always smarted at her exclusion from the London literary world, which she denounced in the wounded narcissism of her inadvertently hilarious *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895).

There is a great chapter on how this paradox of the open secret was worked out in journalism at the end of the 19th century.

Ferguson looks at the career of the proprietor and Spiritualist WT Stead, sent to jail for exposing child prostitution in the 1880s and later one of the most famous victims of the maiden voyage of the *Titanic* in 1912.



Stead embraced virtually every aspect of the occult revival (he seemed to believe everything he was told, however wild) and published a quarterly journal, *Borderland*, between 1893 and 1897.

He also set up Julia's Bureau in 1909, a kind of telephone service where clients could be connected with their beloved dead via Spiritualist mediums who acted as switchboard operators.

Fort's "damned" or rejected knowledge troubles any surety of truth, legend, myth or fiction

There is a good section on Gothic novelist Arthur Machen, who was actually a Fleet Street hack for much of his life. She focuses on Machen's memories of the strange mix of tabloid journalism and bizarre or occult reportage in his last set of autobiographical writings in the 1920s.

This leads into a treatment of Charles Fort, a section that explores his tactics for destabilising the status of truth in his collections of newspaper clippings.

Fort here resituates "damned" or rejected knowledge out of the mosaic of tit-bits in the early years of global mass communications and builds them into collections of facts or fancies that trouble any surety of truth, legend, myth or fiction. It's a sensitive and nuanced reading of his project

The last chapter is on the vogue for psychic detective fiction, which began with Sheridan Le Fanu's loose framing of "cases" of Dr Hesselius in *In a Glass Darkly* (1872), but took off with figures like Flaxman Low, written by the mother and son Hesketh-Prichard writing team for the new mass monthlies of the 1890s, or Algernon Blackwood's stories about psychic investigator John Silence.

Sherlock Holmes hovers on the edge of this genre: a supposedly hyper-rationalist written by Conan Doyle, already a Spiritualist believer, in which "occult" acuity seems always explained away and yet whose problem-solving is full of impossible intuitive leaps.

Ferguson spends much of the chapter, though, on Aleister Crowley's Simon Iff stories, which she suggests work through the morality of Crowley's magical system of Thelema in popular genre terms. Crowley is perhaps the exemplar of this "open secret" logic: a pursuer of hieratic knowledge who never seemed to stop banging on about it in print.

Open Secrets is a work of scholarly literary criticism, attuned to the ambiguities of fiction rather than filleting works for their representation of occult knowledge and traditions as if mere instruments for communicating esoteric wisdom. It remains readable and informative throughout.

A general reader may wish to skip the overlong introduction, however, which involves a lot of academic noodling to clear the ground for this intervention, full of polite but fairly pointed take-downs of where the emerging field of Western Esotericism studies and a longer-established Gothic Studies have failed to talk adequately to each other.

It is an entirely familiar academic requirement of the university press monograph to seek legitimacy in this way, but it could have been 20 rather than 40 pages.

Everything that follows reads with knowledge and calm authority and is a valuable education in a fascinating tradition, much of which has been forgotten and deserves re-assessment.

★★★★

Mistakable for mountains

Delving into Scandinavian tales of trolls – scholarly and delightfully illustrated

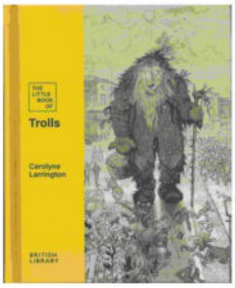
The Little Book of Trolls

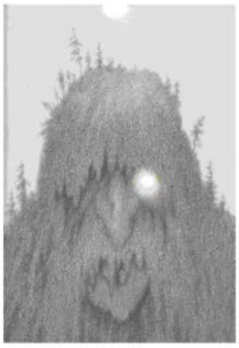
Carolyne Larrington

Britiash Library 2025
Hb, 96pp, £12.99, ISBN 9780712355186

The Little Book of Trolls is an absolute delight, made even more so by the fact that its author is a professor emerita of mediæval European literature at Oxford. This is the first of a series of British Library gift books by Carolyne Larrington, followed by *Dragons* and *Fairies*.

The first mention of trolls is in sagas and poems of Scandinavian origin, but written down in 13th- and 14th-century Iceland. Though the related trows of the Shetland Isles are often fairy-like and small, and can be helpful, most trolls are "larger, ugly and hostile". Norwegian trolls, she writes, "tend to be very large indeed, lumbering through the forests or mistakable for mountains". Although their dangerous mischief is often similar to that of fairies in other countries, they also in some tales have a characteristic similar to vampires, in that the rising sun can turn them to stone (or could it be that that's where the vampire sun allergy originated from?).





Larrington relates a number of folktales about the interaction between trolls and people. As with many folk stories, these are often tales of fair dealing, neighbourliness and helping others in need – and of the consequences of not following such social decency.

Trolls might kill and eat us – but they are also known to mate with human men and women. But it's difficult for trolls and humans to coexist, for "trolls can never properly understand human morality and will always be tempted to take what isn't theirs".

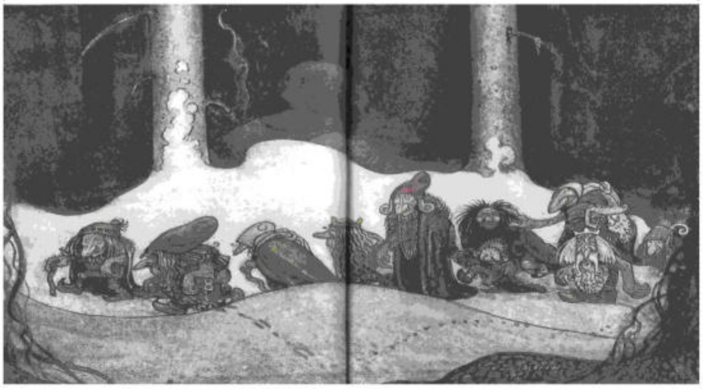
And of course today trolls skulk on the Internet "in the shadows of anonymity, embodying negativity, charmlessness and, sometimes, genuine threat"; like the trolls of folklore, today's troll is "a creature than lurks menacingly in the dark, one that is not very bright and is bent on malice".

The Little Book of Trolls is beautifully illustrated, mainly with late-19th- and early 20th-century paintings and drawings, adding to its charm.

A perfect gift for your troll-loving friends.

David V Barrett

★★★★★



A Year in the Country: Other Worlds

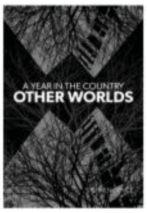
Searching for Far Off Lands via Witchcraft Battles, Spectral Streets, Faded Visions of the Future and the Secrets of the Stones

Stephen Prince

A Year in the Country 2025
Pb, 253pp, £14.95, ISBN 9781916940086

Since 2014, Stephen Prince has established himself as one of the most prolific investigators into the "wyrd, eerie and re-enchanted landscape". Under the banner of *A Year in the Country*, his work has developed from a website into numerous books, albums and artworks: a veritable *Gesamtkunstwerk* unearthing Folk Horror's intertwining roots in music, film and TV.

Producing so much material so quickly does raise concerns about how sustainable a project like this can be: if you've been excavating the hidden worlds of Hauntology and Folk Horror for 13 years is there still fresh ground to dig in?



Other Worlds feels like an answer to that question, consisting of Prince's dispatches from a slightly different imaginative space: from his usual rural haunts, we're travelling as much in the "urban wyrd". The best essays in *Other Worlds* explore these city sensibilities: Prince is excellent on how shows such as *The Likely Lads* and films such as *Get Carter* and *The Reckoning* capture the changes to both urban architecture and class-relations in 1960s and 1970s Britain. He re-evaluates the downbeat atmospherics of Whitehall-set espionage drama *The Sandbaggers* and – in the longest essay – riffs on the sleazy Soho recreations of films from *The Small World of Sammy Lee* to *Last Night in Soho* via 1990s bands Gallon Drunk and Tindersticks.

Prince's eye remains eclectic: other topics for rediscovery here include electronic music pioneer Suzanne Ciani, the 1979 ITV adaptation of MR James's "Casting the Runes" and even 1980s BBC detective drama series *Bergerac*…

Prince's style captures his enthusiasm for his subject matter: his essays are eager summaries, tugs on the sleeve of readers to follow him into seeking out his discoveries. What frustrates however, is that for all his skill in linking one film or programme to another, he regularly offers more than he delivers: there's often a lack of commentary, analysis or context on the release and reception of the works under discussion. His clear love for a topic is also hampered by unnecessary content and stylistic tics (sentences regularly drift into a list of words followed by "etc"). It is, unfortunately, the drawback of self-publishing: the ability to write freely on topics of personal interest without the assistance and guidance of a keen-eyed editor.

Farmers have long known the benefits of leaving fields fallow for a while: letting land recover from a period of intense cultivation so it can recover before being worked again. Based on the example of *Other Worlds*, maybe a similar process of restoration might be beneficial for Prince and allow him to provide a richer crop for the next stage of his personal project.

Ross MacFarlane

★★★

Fascist Yoga

Grifters, Occultists, White Supremacists and the New Order in Wellness

Stewart Home

Pluto Press 2025
Pb, 224pp, £14.99, ISBN 9780745351124

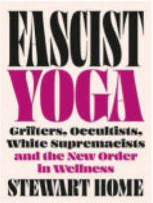
Cultural provocateur Stewart Home's assault on the world of Western postural yoga dissects the perverse ideologies that colonise many aspects of wellness culture.

Prompted by Sanjiv Bhattacharya's 2016 article "Call Me A Racist, But Don't Say I'm A Buddhist" – an examination of the American Freedom Party and Spiritualism – Home investigates fascism's fascination with Eastern mysticism and yoga.

Following a chronological line from "The Great Oom" Pierre Bernard (1875-1955), carnival showman, architect of Western postural practice and founder of the Tantrick Order of America (1905), Home explores the ease with which homegrown gurus fleece gullible aspirants from the Roaring Twenties to the present day.

The key to success was the creation of an imaginary genealogy, and Home documents with a humorous grimace how Bernard, and his heirs, offered yoga devotees a mixture of fitness alongside an unpalatable Aryan mythography.

A gallery of rogues happy to exploit a clientele versed in the "new thought" movement, Theosophy and the occult forms occupies Home's compelling history. Take, for example, Francis Yeats Brown (1886-1944), or JFC Fuller (1878-1966), devotee of the Beast himself, both of whom espoused race theory and reactionary cosmic narratives which exploited Hindu cosmology to promote their versions of Western yogic discipline.


FASCIST YOGA
Grifters, Occultists, White Supremacists and the New Order in Wellness
STEWART HOME

As an interest in yoga, Spiritualism and Eastern philosophy escalated following the First World War, Home reflects on the many spurious right-wing autobiographies and opportunist tracts that accompanied this phenomenon – strange bedfellows, indeed!

As wryly as Home details such curious publications, he reminds us that beyond the health dimensions of postural practice the industry was fraught with sinister theorists. As Europe lurched towards the cataclysm of World War II, ideologues like Guido Keller (1892-1938) and Jakob Wilhelm (1861-1962) embroiled physical culture within the political philosophies of national renewal, corporatism, and traditionalism – Fascism and National Socialism. Such extreme views found further intellectual support from yoga devotees and scholars of Hinduism, notably Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) and Julius Evola (1898-1974). Whatever became of standing on one's head?

In the shadow of the death camps the post-1945 scene remained resolutely Western in outlook and by the 1960s found countercultural chic.

With the emergence of the superstar guru and saturation marketing, Home catalogues the "eternal recurrence" of the same old toot sold as new-age revelation. A wild west of opportunity for jobbing writers no less, as the likes of Richard Hittleman (1927-1991) clinically exploited the lucrative mail-order world with a plethora of false claims; the wool firmly pulled over the public's third eye! Home's history is replete with such scoundrels, all equally as fascinating as repellent.

His message is salutary; yoga culture is not immune from the taint of extremism and abuse as evidenced by many other spiritual and occult organisations. Beware! A highly recommended chakra-cleansing exposé.

Chris Hill

★★★★★

Dazzling Darkness

The Lives and Afterlives of the Christian Mystics

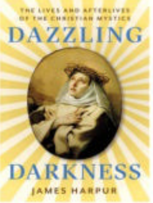
James Harpur

Hurst 2025

Hb, 464pp, £25, ISBN 9781911723905

James Harpur's thoughtful compendium of the lives and thoughts of Christian mystics will be useful on several levels.

Firstly, he has gathered more than 70 from the most famous and celebrated to the least known but no less significant. Secondly, he sets out their biographical details, as well as their social and historical backgrounds. Thirdly, he spends considerable time on the theological reception and subsequent influence of their writings and reputations; especially how they are to be positioned against the fierce religious debates, schisms and reformations.



Fourthly, thanks to a generous 25-page index, these mystics and their topics are easily located (as this is the kind of deep and complex storehouse which will have its readers flicking back and forth).

One of the significant characteristics of mystical prose was that, almost inevitably, it abounded in contradictions – like the eponymous "dazzling darkness" – as the ineffable was condensed into clumsy words.

Curiously, it seems as though it is Paul, the reformed persecutor of Christians, who may have been the first Christian mystic, not Jesus, because the aim or result of Christian mysticism was to become more Christ-like.

There are many moving stories in this encyclopædic study, which will appeal to different directions of interest.

Mysticism has not been a kind or easy occupation for the many female Christian mystics, whose simplicity and devotion could easily attract followings, and usually the animosity of the male-dominated clerical establishment.

One that stood out for me was the sad account of a wandering preacher, the French Beguine, Marguerite Porete.

Marguerite wrote a poetic work that described the soul's journey toward dissolution into the divine light of God. She wrote it sometime before 1308, when she was arrested for refusing to "disown her teachings" about the supremacy of divine love over the cant and pomp of the Church.

In 1308 she was burned in Paris by the order of the Bishop of Cambrai. It was said that many who witnessed her execution were moved to tears by her dignity and piety as she died among the flames. Her *Mirror of Souls* survived anonymously until her authorship was recognised several centuries later.

Harpur – an historian, scholar and a bit of a mystic himself – concludes with a selection of his own poetic meditations on those who affected him most.

For readers so inclined this informative volume will become a valuable reference.

Bob Rickard

★★★★★

Eaters of the Dead

Myths and Realities of Cannibal Monsters

Kevin J Wetmore Jr

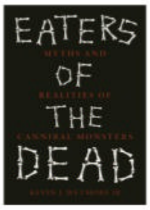
Reaktion Books 2025

Pb, 272pp, £10.99, ISBN 9781836391609

"We have an atavistic memory of being prey, a fear of being eaten alive," this book opens – yet this fear will inevitably come true in the end.

All corpses are "consumed" in one way or another; by bacteria, insects, flames, the Conqueror Worm… or sometimes by other hungry humans.

But is it really true that "Eating people is wrong," as Malcolm Bradbury once memorably put it? Not necessarily. "Oddly," the author writes, "the Bible does not have any specific proscription against cannibalism." So, you can actually covet thy neighbour's ass, just so long as by that you mean eating his bum for dinner. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Catholics consume the literal transubstantiated Body of Christ during their Mass. Perhaps this is why, in ancient Rome, Christians were libelled as enjoying biting into babies; a libel then projected on from Christians towards Jews.



One religious sect who really do swallow corpses are the Hindu Aghori, a band of ascetics who dwell in charnel-houses and make sure they don't get too full by chewing on the bodies like sacred cows on cud; by consuming the deceased, they hope to eliminate the dichotomy between life and death and so escape the indignities of samsara, the eternal cycle of existence. In 2017, a CNN reporter shared a bowl of human brains with them … before quickly being accused of cultural appropriation.

Besides sanguinary saints like the above, Wetmore also covers a long litany of other, distinctly more unholy, cannibals, both supernatural (ghuls, ogres, zombies, draugrs, trolls, cynocephali) and human (Ed Gein, Sawney Bean, Sweeney Todd, Armen Miewes, Hannibal Lecter), from real-life and fiction. I particularly enjoyed the tasty photo of a severed head and full-bodied frozen ice-child being sold from a table as improvised packed-lunches during a 1921 Russian winter famine.

Well-illustrated and clearly written, the text's only real defect is that, due to the mass of material covered, some of it is rather rushed by in a superficial sense; only about a paragraph is given over to Idi Amin and Emperor Bokassa's alleged missionary-swallowing habits, for instance.

Nonetheless, a most enjoyable book. You'll devour it from start to finish, even if some parts are little more than a (literal) finger-buffet.

SD Tucker

★★★★

Witchlore facts and fables

Jeremy Harte explores the often less than salubrious folklore of witches in Devon and Wales, in two rather mismatched studies

Devon's Forgotten Witches

1860–1910

Tracey Norman & Mark Norman

History Press 2025
Pb, 144pp, £15.99, ISBN 9781803994215

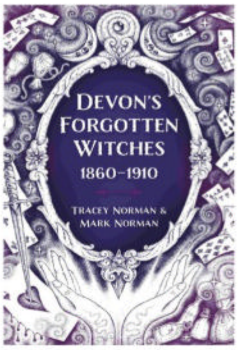
Of Doves and Ravens

The Witches and Wisefolk of Wales and the Borders

Benjamin Stimpson

History Press 2025
Hb, 320pp, £19.99, ISBN 9781837050093

They weren't nice people. The cunning folk traced by Tracey and Mark Norman lived in dingy terraces not rustic nooks, where their magic seldom went beyond shuffling cards and mixing powders. Only in turning the screw on clients were they creative. Your face will be drawn down to your toes and you will die aged 39 unless you pay £1, and that's with 5s discount. If you claim your £2 10s back your aunt will die raving in a madhouse. Your case requires a special visit with board and lodging paid, beef only thank you. Whatever you leave undone, raise the £5. Magical service providers were low-grade sharks in a sea of human misery.

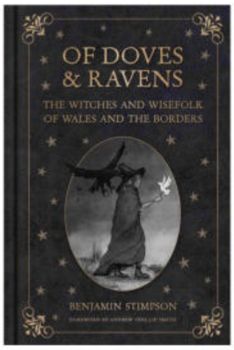


At the peak of the profession, the White Witch of Exeter could afford consulting rooms and a doorman to spy on clients. James Tuckett, who held the title in 1852, wrote a splendid charm for cattle cure, with biblical citations and instructions on how to stick a heart with pins. Humans got more perfunctory treatment, though the command to go into the churchyard and gather herbs by night is poetical. But clients preferred the magic of modernity. A photo of the man she would marry was sent by "Professor" Priestley to a woman whom he promptly offered a five-year chart, ending with an urgent need to know more. Alas, she was already married, to the policeman who used her as an agent provocateur.

Legal evidence was rarely so simple, as witnesses would dither over exactly what a cunning man had done in hopes of avoiding a conviction. What they wanted was money back when the magic hadn't worked: what they got was a bit-part in the legal pillorying of popular belief. Trials were a ritual humiliation of the poor for believing what everyone believed, where gales of laughter followed every confession of unhappiness or disability, especially if there was a pun to be got out of the word "spirits".

Benjamin Stimpson's anthology comes from a very different world, and not just because Wales has replaced Devon.

In these traditional stories, fact is veiled by layers of self-promoting fantasy where the magic will always work and the cunning man emerges triumphant from every encounter.



Though Taliesin and the Physicians of Myddfai have been added to swell the ranks of Welshness, the best anecdotes are those told about more obscure figures. These are as stereotyped as ghost stories, beginning with someone who has a problem, or maybe someone who is a problem. The magician is brought in, despite doubts that this may be beyond even his powers. Then the sick are made well, lost goods are found, thieves are clearly shown in the mirror, and the local witch is satisfactorily unmasked. The cunning man infallibly knows what is happening far away and goes off flying high above the trees. He is Superman on contract.

Fabulation came fast: Dick Spot of Oswestry is credited with all the usual feats in a chapbook written within five years of his death. Even with figures as well-documented as the four Carmarthenshire generations of the Harries family, the legends are stereotyped and little survives of the original man. Everything but the names is interchangeable with tales told in England, except that the Welsh conjurors kept a reputation for dealing with the fairies a century after this had become unfashionable further east. The oldest lore appears in stories centred on clerical characters from the late Middle Ages, and in these cycles the work of service magic has been eclipsed completely by jocular stories about the magician's competitive relationship with his buddy, the Devil.

Dr Harries, Cwrt-y-Cadno, had a chained book that he only dared open once in 12 months, in a wood illuminated by flashes of lightning. How much grander than the shabby Greek copy of the *Iliad* with which James Tuckett bamboozled his clients – unless you prefer reality to fiction. The History Press evidently don't, for *Doves and Ravens* has been given lavish attention in design and marketing, while *Devon's Forgotten Witches* is a plain paperback.

The Normans are first-class researchers; Stimpson is a personable browser who relies on copyists like Wirt Sykes, and uses sources he knows to be fraudulent like Marie Trevelyan. His book would inspire a life-long love of traditional lore in any young reader, but when they grow up and get serious they will want real works of folklore research.

Norman & Norman ★★★★★
Stimpson ★★★★

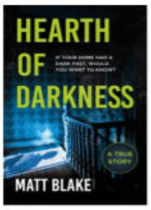
Hearth of Darkness

If Your Home had a Dark Past, Would You Want to Know?

Matt Blake

Elliott & Thompson 2025
Hb, 256pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781783969159

A few years ago, journalist Matt Blake bought a house in Walthamstow, north-east London. At the time he was unaware that a former occupant had been Aman Vyas, who had carried out multiple rapes and a murder in the area. He became colloquially known as the "E17 Night Stalker". In 2020, he was sentenced to at least 37 years of imprisonment.



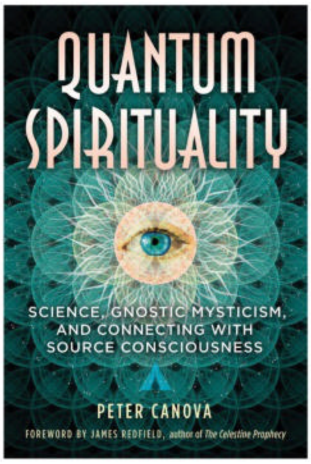
Evidence of fire damage could be seen at Blake's house, and he learned that firefighters had been to the street 20 times since the year 2000, including some visits to his address. A close neighbour attributed the fires to the Night Stalker, although she didn't know whether he had lit them deliberately.

Odd phenomena were experienced in the house after Blake moved in. A radio seemingly came on by itself, and at one point, his girlfriend heard the doorbell ringing in the early hours of a Sunday morning, though no one was at the door. Some rooms were much colder than others, irrespective of how high the heating was set. There were also unpleasant smells, although they may have been related to rodent incursions. Another disagreeable manifestation was the appearance of large slugs in the house.

Much of the book revolves around the question of whether events can leave localised impressions that can affect people. Blake consulted specialists such as parapsychologists and an Anglican priest involved in "deliverance" work. The final chapter sounds positive and optimistic, though there are occasional on-going phenomena such as the shower sometimes coming on by itself at night. It's hard to know to what extent, if any, the various manifestations have been paranormal – or in any way related to the previous occupancy of Aman Vyas. The book is well written and researched; the content is intriguing.

Peter A McCue
★★★★★

ALSO RECEIVED | WE LEAF THROUGH A SMALL SELECTION OF THE DOZENS OF BOOKS THAT HAVE ARRIVED AT FORTEAN TOWERS IN RECENT MONTHS AND WERE LOST DOWN THE BACK OF SOFA...


QUANTUM SPIRITUALITY
SCIENCE, GNOSTIC MYSTICISM, AND CONNECTING WITH SOURCE CONSCIOUSNESS
PETER CANOVA
FOREWORD BY JAMES REDFIELD, author of The Celestine Prophecy

Quantum Spirituality: Science, Gnostic Mysticism, and Connecting with Source Consciousness

Peter Canova

Bear & Co, 2022
Pb, £14.99, 248pp. ISBN 9781591434634

At the heart of the book is a perceptive decoding of Gnostic writings depicting Mary Magdalene as the foremost of Jesus's followers. This leads to a spirited speculation about what the cult and teachings of Jesus might have become had contemporary cultural misogyny not led to her suppression in the records. Similar speculation follows about the murder by Christians in Alexandria of the brilliant Neoplatonist philosopher and mathematician Hypatia, which similarly stifled a strong line of female wisdom-oriented Gnostic Christianity. The quantum buzzword signals discussion of 'subjective perception' which Canova connects to "source consciousness" (not to be confused with Source Magic – see below).

Source Magic: The Origin of Art, Science, and Culture

Carl Abrahamsson

Park Street Press, 2023
PB, £12.99, 236pp. ISBN 9781644115015

Magic, we are often reminded, is reviled by Science. Abrahamsson – a lauded veteran writer on 'occulture' – holds forth on the notion that the real debt is in the other direction, since most of the sciences (physical and otherwise) emerged over time from various systems of magic.He surveys an extensive and overlapping range of subjects to show that magic (however you define it) has never gone away. The fact that it is continually being reinvented at almost every level of society worldwide shows both its underlying social usefulness and irrepressible virility. He examines historical expressions from ancient shamanism to modern psychedelics, including those by Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth (TOPY); the 'panic rituals' of the Master Musicians of Joujouka in Morocco; writers and artists such as William S Burroughs, Brion Gysin, Ezra Pound and Austin Osman Spare; and the film-makers Ernst Jünger and Derek Jarman. All of these, he argues, are both rooted in magic and employ magical methodology. He also makes a point about magic being instinctively grasped by children and adds a warning about how the personal and socially beneficial aspects of magic can be corrupted by both religious organisations and occult societies. He knows his material and expresses it well.

Aliens and the Apocalypse

Irena McCammon Scott

Flying Disc Press, 2024
Pb, price unknown, 310pp. ISBN 9781526177230

Not to be confused with *Alien Apocalypse* (the series), or the novels *Alien Apocalypse* or *Aliens: Apocalypse* or *Love, Sex and the Alien Apocalypse*, for which too many trees have died. This tome rehashes much old ground from the history of UFOs – sorry, the Gen-Z term is UAP – which instead of explanations and solutions are here represented as "clues". The author – who seems to be among the growing number of academics throwing their hats into the ring (why not, everyone else seems to doing so), however has an ace: interpreting everything (contactees, abductees, messages, sightings and even conspiracies) in the light of patriarchy's hi-jacking of all the historical innovations and teachings originated by women. Nevertheless, the worthy Ms Scott is here ill-served by Flying Disk, there being missing front matter, no cover price, no index and what appears to be a complete lack of proof-reading.

Nothing in this Book is True But it's Exactly How Things Are

Bob Frissell

Bear & Co, 2024
Pb, £15.37, 368pp. ISBN 9781591435181

Want to "travel beyond the limitations of time and space"? For the cover price you can access the "wisdom of Ascended Masters" of such secret schools as 'Breath Alchemy' and 'Christ Consciousness', for this is no less than the "Secret History of the Earth and Merkaba (Light Body) Activation (etc)". This incredible 30th edition (originally published in 1994) will reassure you with the mystical signs of flying saucers and pyramids on its cover. Pretty cheap if it really is your ticket "to join the Ascended Masters".

Psychiatry and the Spirit World: True Stories on the Survival of Consciousness after Death

Alan Sanderson

Park Street Press, 2022
Pb, £14.55. ISBN 9781644115763

The blurb explains: "After a 20-year break from practice, Alan Sanderson returned to clinical psychiatry at age 59 and soon realised that many of his patients were plagued by troublesome earthbound spirits, some of whom had been attached across lifetimes to multiple incarnations as well as multiple hosts." By talking with these attached spirits and persuading them to leave their hosts, Dr Sanderson cobbles together dozens of stories of OOBEs, NDEs, and other types of encounters with "entities". His conclusion recommends that the general topic of "survival" be incorporated into the treatment of people already suffering from "mental health problems" in this beleaguered world.

The Alchemical Search for the Unified Field

RE Kretz

Inner Traditions, 2023
Pb, £25, 496pp, ISBN 9781591434498

Kretz is an IT specialist who also served time as a Rosicrucian, a Freemason and a 'hermetic geometrician' and practises various forms of shamanism. Inspired by alchemists of the past, his main theme is that "we attain enlightenment when the energies of our Third Eye are balanced (in equilibrium), enabling it to resonate as a harmonic waveform generator [which] can be achieved through meditation and the synchronising vibration of vocal mantras." His 'proof' takes the form of sacred geometry as pioneered by the late John Michell and others (who are not credited here), which he sees repeated in many forms in different eras and cultures. The result focuses on the "mechanics" of the Philosopher's Stone, Pythagorean theories of the transmigration of the soul, and a so-called "alchemical path" (inevitably based upon Qabalah) as a "system", he claims, "for attaining enlightenment". Places and buildings based on these principles, therefore, become ideal locations for meditation. It's all been said before, but to its credit, this expression is very well illustrated.

Prehistoric Sussex

Alex Vincent

Amberley Publishing, 2023
Pb, £15.99, 96pp. ISBN 9781398112254

This is a short but well-illustrated historical survey of mounds and other local landscape features, many of which can still easily be seen today, catalogued by their Palæolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Bronze and Iron Age characteristics.

Cold war of the sexes

Andrzej Zuławski's harrowing and enigmatic 1981 remains unforgettable – just don't try to explain it!

Possession

Dir Andrzej Zuławski, France/West Germany, 1981
Second Sight Films, 4K/Blu-ray

There's a phenomenon in film fandom right now in which people comb over every image, set design, set dressing and so forth looking for signs or clues as to what the director intended, presumably in order to proclaim that they have 'cracked the code' of difficult films. Stanley Kubrick is perhaps the director who has suffered most from this, with fans (and they are generally fans, as opposed to objective movie goers) poring over the minutest details to search for some hidden meaning. Even stuff in *The Shining*, like patterned carpets and posters on a wall, are subject to scrutiny which, frankly, they can't withstand. David Lynch gets the same treatment, even though the late director himself stated many times that there are no hidden meanings in his work. But people like a challenge and to award themselves a pat on the back when they think they have made a discovery. In other fields this is admirable, but to apply it to something as straightforward as *The Shining* strikes me as taking it too far.

This method has been tried on Andrzej Zuławski's *Possession*, which does, to be fair, defy easy interpretation. It is one of the strangest, most confusing and most recondite films you are ever likely to see. It's unquestionably a European arthouse piece, but it also contains scenes of disturbing violence and gore, which is probably why it came to the attention of genre fans; it was, after all, banned in the UK in the early 1980s, having got caught up in in the 'video nasties' era of pearl-clutching.

> *It was banned in the UK, having got caught up in the video nasties era*

The story – the bits of it that I get anyway – concerns a husband, Mark (Sam Neill), and his wife Anna (Isabelle Adjani). Mark, a spy, has come back to Berlin after a long foreign assignment and learns that Anna has been having an affair in his absence, and that it has been going on for some time. Mark tries to persuade his wife – to cajole her, to bully her, to threaten her – to end the affair and stay with him. Naturally, she turns him down and moves out. She returns to their flat occasionally to see their young son, Bob; the arguments and fights provoked by these visits make Anna distraught to the point of breakdown. These early parts of the film are harrowing because they are a realistic portrayal of a crumbling marriage. Anyone who has ever gone through heartbreak, self-harm and/or mental illness will no doubt wince in recognition at some of these sequences.

The film then takes a turn into metaphysical nightmare, as Mark meets Bob's schoolteacher Helen who is the spitting image of his wife. Anna rents a grotty apartment in an imposing mansion block right next to the Berlin wall and while visitors go in, they don't seem to come out. It's from this point on that the film defies both expectation and interpretation. One wonders whether the events we see are actually happening or are the hallucinations of a fractured mind. And that's just the start of it. In one extraordinary sequence, Anna freaks out in a cold, wet and deserted subway tunnel and miscarries… something.

I can't really talk about the rest of it, because I simply do not understand it. This of course is where the codebreakers come into their own, and multiple interpretations have been made, none of which seem wholly satisfactory to me; which is why I rambled on about Kubrick and Lynch at the beginning of this review. Sometimes there are films that entirely resist explanation and, if they make sense to anyone, make sense only to the director. That is quite possible with *Possession* because, as is made clear in the copious extras on the disc, the script was written by Zuławski during his own painful divorce.

My advice is to simply experience this film and, if you want to, think about it afterwards. And I can guarantee you *will* think about it afterwards because there are sequences that are incredibly vivid, harrowing and not easily forgotten. But don't try to 'solve' it, because to do that would be to strip away the mysteries that make it so memorable. In Van Morrison's song "Summertime in England" he sings, "It ain't why, why, why / It just is." Sometimes there is no explanation, no 'correct answer'. *Possession* is *sui generis*; it just is.

Second Sight's new restoration, released in both 4K UHD and standard Blu-ray, comes with a wealth of fabulous extras and is highly recommended.

Daniel King

★★★★★

The Dig

Dir Andy & Ryan Tohill, Ireland, 2018
On digital platforms

This film could be seen as Folk Horror, given that a fairy tree in a circle of stones influences the progression of its narrative. Ronan (Moe Dunford) returns to a dilapidated farmhouse on the edge of a bog, where a man is digging, marking sections with flags. Seán (Lorcan Cranitch) is searching for his lost daughter; Ronan, recently released from prison, was convicted of her murder. At first the two clash violently, but Ronan joins in the dig as he has no memory of the night of the murder as he was drunk. Seán's daughter Roberta (Emily Taafe) also reluctantly accepts Ronan's presence, they had once been friends and perhaps more. But the relationship between the three is a rollercoaster of emotions. There is also violence from locals and the local police chief, Murphy (Francis Magee); heavily bearded, always in rough plain clothes, a pistol at his hip, he is more like a sheriff. A Beckettian Bog Western, then, where the participants wallow in the mud searching for something that might not even be there. Seán makes a drink with berries picked from the fairy tree in the belief that it will restore his memory. Ronan accepts the elixir, sharing Seán's faith in the old ways. Dark secrets, in many senses, are uncovered as the film progresses.

Páiric Ó Corráin

★★★★☆

TELEVISION

FT's resident couch potatoes, **STU NEVILLE & RUTH MORRIS** cast an eye over the small screen's current fortean offerings

Opening to the haunting sounds of The Unthanks, a folk band favoured by directors seeking to create a mystical ambience and sense of mythic landscape, *The Sycamore Gap Mystery* recounts a shocking sequence of events from September 2023. Although at first glance not overtly fortean, this two-part programme chronicles what became a modern-day witch-hunt for the destroyers of a tree that had become a beloved local icon.

The scene is set: a bleak Northumberland landscape, a track along Hadrian's Wall to a gap with the eponymous sycamore dominating the view: a sequence from Costner's *Robin Hood*, which catapulted the tree to international fame, until one dark and stormy night, when the sycamore was no more, felled in minutes by an unknown, chainsaw-wielding hand.

What becomes immediately apparent is the tree's totemic significance to the locals – the nearest pub served Sycamore Gap Bitter, the butcher made Sycamore Gap sausages, and people clearly saw the tree as a locus of their community, imbuing it with an deep symbolic status: the sudden loss of this ritual object sent a palpable shockwave through them, and with it a burning desire to find those responsible. As with any similar, emotionally-charged outrage, in the haste to find a perpetrator the initial suspect – a local teenager – is immediately subjected to brutal trial by social media despite very quickly being proven innocent. The net widens into an intricate web of suspicion as everyone who owns a chainsaw becomes a potential suspect (as one elderly lady tells us, in this area more people own chainsaws than don't). On day two a second arrest is made: a middle-aged man accused of seeking revenge against the National Trust – this is apparently a thing – but he too is quickly eliminated from enquiries. The pitchfork, torch and smartphone wielding mob grows more restless, irritated by the perceived lack of police action – cue more stormy weather scenes and Unthanks – until yet another anonymous tip-off furnishes two names from a bit further afield. The evidence starts to pile up, including a film clip depicting the felling on one of the suspect's phones (although it's so darkly blurry that even *Ghosts Caught On Camera* would hesitate to use it). CCTV of vehicles, an array of chainsaws and a near-farcical escalation between the two suspects as they try to offload responsibility onto one another raises this above the usual police procedural, and it's a consistently engaging watch as the cops sew up the case. From our perspective, though, the psychogeography at its heart is the story's main theme: thousands of trees are felled every day, and objectively this was just one more; however its significance to the local community and the impact of its loss reminds us just how important context is in fortean subjects.

The net widens as everyone who owns a chainsaw becomes a suspect

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth **REVEREND PETER LAWS** dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot!

Exploitation cinema can be grim and grubby, but time and again it offers the most honest responses to the anxieties of the age. On the surface, *Ms. 45* is pure grindhouse provocation: a shy (and mute) young woman is raped twice in one New York day – first among the trash cans of a putrid alleyway, then in her supposedly 'safe' apartment. So, she takes a 45-pistol dropped by her second attacker, and walks the streets at night, shooting men dead. Michael Winner's *Death Wish* had shown how audiences would root for a victim pushed into 'righteous killing' and earlier rape-revenge movies did the same for women. Yet what's so clever about *Ms. 45* is that she doesn't just kill 'bad men', she'll kill any man. Even, the 'nice ones'. Director Abel Ferrara could have presented this as a woman gone mad, similar to the final scenes of De Palma's *Carrie*, in which Sissy Spacek kills even those who were kind to her because her fury is out of control. This is different. By turning all men into viable targets, Ferrara simply flips the norms. He asks: what if a man's sense of safety became as fragile as a female's? Some may argue the ending is overtly symbolic, but I thought it was a jaw-dropping conclusion to a still shocking, yet perceptive, work of art.

Deadly Friend deals with its pressures differently, presenting a story of grief, in which a teenager brings a lost love back via artificial intelligence. Fresh from *Elm Street*, Wes Craven's messy hybrid of romance, sci-fi, and suburban horror was famously mutilated by the studio, and it shows. This surprisingly morbid love story has its moments, and it's touching in places. Yet there's a fundamental glitch in the software, causing the film to lurch from mood to mood, much like the rebooted friend of the title; neither she nor the film itself ever really finds a route out of the absurd.

Where *Deadly Friend* is awkward, *The Return of the Living Dead* strides with utter confidence. Dan O'Bannon's set-up is crazy simple: for fun, a medical supplies worker whacks a drum filled with the toxic corpses from Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. This resurrection gas gets into the atmosphere and rains down on the cemetery next door. You can guess the rest. Beneath the neon punk humour and still fabulous practical effects are comments on government authority and environmental recklessness. Yet unlike *Deadly Friend*, it's worthy themes never detract from a film being an absolute blast.

All three films (polished up by Arrow Video) are resurrection stories in their own way. But they suggest that resurrection doesn't heal injustice: it exposes it. It drags trauma into the open where it can no longer be politely ignored. This is the much-needed power of exploitation cinema: a space where ugly realities are allowed to erupt without polite restraint. Sometimes, it takes unpleasantly sharp excess to really tell the truth.

Audiences would root for a victim pushed into righteous killing

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LETTERS

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Jumping into chocolate

In Sidelines [**FT439-8**] is a short piece on a woman who saved herself from a factory fire by jumping into a vat of liquid chocolate. There was a 1962 comedy skit by the Smothers Brothers called "Chocolate" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kH0IZZRd0bI). It's remembered for the line "I yelled 'fire' when I fell into the chocolate."

Morgan Girling
By email

Busted debunks

Regarding Mythchaser's request for a name for a no longer valid debunking that nevertheless persists [**FT458:23**]: Imagining the Ship of History as a rotting hulk on the oceans of time, bits dropping off and floating around getting in the way of clarity, how about Debunkum? The flotsam of past explanations.

Dean Teasdale
Gateshead, Tyne & Wear

Klingon UAPs

I laughed out loud reading William Hohauser's suggestions for pronouncing 'UAP' [**FT463:65**]. Well done, sir! It then struck me that another appropriate suggestion would be saying it in Klingon? I am no longer fluent, but I believe this would be pronounced, "OO", "AH", "PAH" (in aggressive capitals, naturally).

Mark Evans
By email

Thoughts on FT464

In the Letters section [**FT464:64**], the *Hampshire Telegraph* correspondent 'Old Inhabitant' repeats an account of the Portsea Phantom Rabbit being promptly shot at by a soldier after it suddenly appeared from behind a stack of wood. I would question whether a soldier in the early part of the 19th century would be carrying a loaded weapon around the town. Would it even be technically possible?

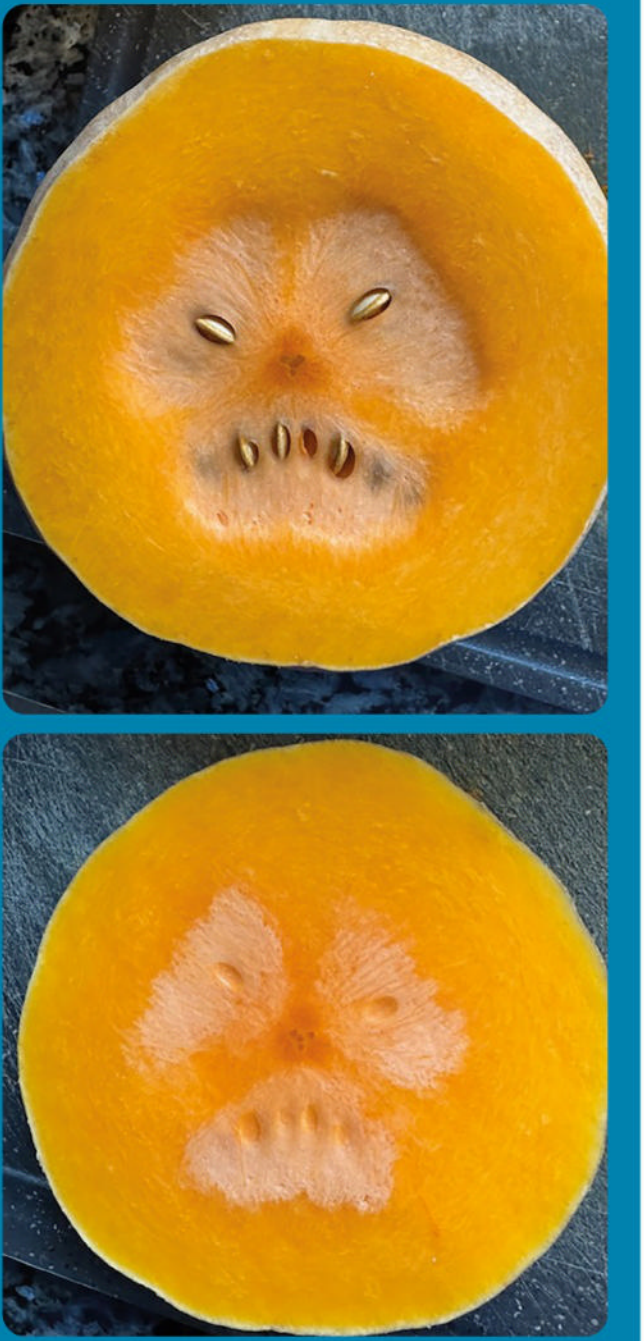
I wonder if the 'haunted' ranking of chairs in "Fairies, Folklore and Forteana" [**FT464:23**] is more a question of sentiment than anything else. Family or friends may be reluctant to let someone sit in the late X's chair as they like to imagine him or her sitting there.

In Phil Baker's "Emperor of the Night" [**FT464:4-45**], Hervey is quoted as wondering how those with no artistic talent can dream up remarkable works of art. I would suggest that there are two things you need to be a great artist: the ability to imagine your art, and the technical ability to bring it to fruition. One without the other won't work.

Regarding the Forum piece on snakes, and tales of flying ones [**FT464:52-53**], there is a gliding snake, genus *Chrysopelea*, found in South East Asia. It flares its body in such a way that it can glide from tree to tree, but from video footage it seems a long way from actually flying.

Dave Miles
By email

SIMULACRA CORNER



Stuart J Rose of Northallerton, North Yorkshire, cut into a butternut squash only to be confronted by the likeness of Papa Lazarou from *The League of Gentlemen.*

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200,**

The Armless Carpenter

Jan Bondeson's article on the Armless Carpenter [**FT464:69**] has an interesting local connection for me. In 1929, 48 Constance Road, East Dulwich, where George Edward Thomas died, was larger than a nursing home. It was the Constance Road Institution, a major provider of healthcare in the area. It was a former workhouse, and patients included elderly people, people with disabilities and those who were mentally ill.

The Institution later became part of St Francis Hospital and was demolished in 1993 to make way for housing. I live on the site of the morgue, so it is likely that George Edward Thomas spent some time where I am right now. None of the former residents ever visit, fortunately, but we do occasionally find fragments of old pottery in the garden.

Paula Dempsey
London

LETTERS

The Zizians

In response to 'Anon's letter on the subject of the Zizians (**FT464:63**), I am alarmed but wearily not surprised at their quite-frankly bizarre reasoning that 'transphobia' might be the driving factor behind the cult's deranged and murderous behaviour. The assertion of rampant transphobia by gender ideologists and activists is a tool used to shut down debate on the issue, and despite claims that violence against trans-identified people is on the rise in the US and UK, the facts just do not back this up.

For example, for the year ending March 2025, police-recorded hate crimes against people identifying as transgender in England and Wales fell by 11%. It is also a well-established principle that increases in hate crime figures often correlate with increased public awareness, and so alongside intense media scrutiny it becomes difficult to separate *actual* incidents from reported ones.

The assertion that the actions of the Zizian cult were "widely reported on" seems on the surface to bear a *grain* of truth, although the articles available online are not headline stories and to my knowledge the Zizians have not been a prominent story in UK print or television media (none of the friends or family I asked had ever heard of them, and I only know about them myself because of Noel Rooney's article in **FT458:42-45** and **459:44-47**). In fact, the majority of online articles appear to come from US news outlets, which would make sense given that this was a US-based cult.

'Anon' points out to John Gray [Letters, **FT460:61**] that "the vast majority of death cults aren't made up of trans folk". I don't believe Mr Gray made this assertion, and given that current figures estimate around only 1-2% of the US population claims to be trans-identified (0.8% of adults compared to the much higher 3.3% amongst 13-17 year olds) then it would be ridiculous to think otherwise. With regards to the claim that trans-identified people in the US and UK are having "the few rights they had revoked", this is patently false. What rights do trans-identified people want that they do not currently have? I have asked this question to trans-identified people and have never been given a coherent response. I suspect that access to female-only spaces and sporting categories is the elusive answer to this question. If you do not understand why biological women fiercely protect our hard-won rights, then you do not understand women. Furthermore, it is not our responsibility to 'affirm' trans-identified people's feelings by forgoing these rights.

'Anon' goes on to pour scorn on John Gray's fear of getting on the wrong side of those who share the gender ideology of the Zizians, but may I point out that it is more often those who are termed 'gender critical' – i.e., people who believe that biological sex is immutable – that are subject to intimidation and threats of violence. You need only look at the treatment received by JK Rowling, Kellie-Jay Keen, Helen Joyce and all the 'gender-critical' women who choose to stand up to the narcissists embroiled in a misogynistic social contagion that seeks to erase the rights of biological women and girls. Death threats and physical violence are documented regular occurrences for these women, yet it is the trans activists and their allies that claim *they* are the ones most at risk. 'Anon' asserted that trans-identified people are more likely to be assaulted and murdered than to be the perpetrators of those crimes.

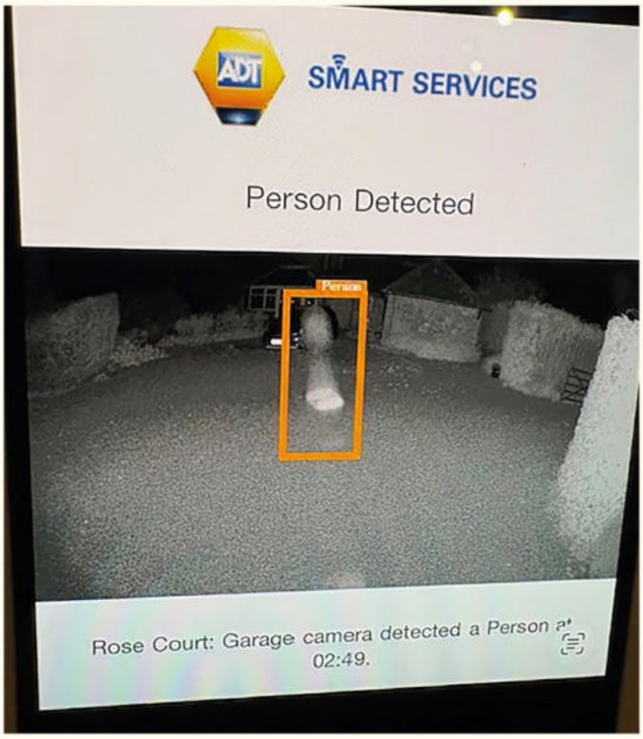
Whilst it is difficult to pinpoint the exact figures, let's use, as an example, a *Forbes* article that states 350 transgender people were murdered in the US in 2024. Whilst every murder, no matter the demographic of the victims, is despicable, this equates to just over 2% of all recorded US homicides in 2024 and appears to correlate with the number of trans-identified people resident in the US for that year, meaning they are no more likely to be victims of murder than any other demographic. Data on trans-identified perpetrators of homicide in the US is almost impossible to find due to recorded data being sex-based, but on that note I will point out that the vast majority of homicides, both in the UK and the US, as 'Anon' rightly points out, are committed by biological men, of which

A Pluckley ghost?

I live in Kent, not far from Pluckley – the subject of a recent FT article [**FT461:26-35**] and on 17 October 2025 I attended St Nicholas Church in the village as there was a book launch on the village ghosts and their origins.

I sat next to a lady who lived in Rose Cottage (above), which is a well-known supposed haunted house in the village, and home to one of the 12 'original' ghosts that are said to haunt the locale. During the break in the talk I asked her if she had had any experiences at all in the house. She came across as a sceptic, but said her husband was a believer and had heard things in the house. "However," she told me, "We were woken up very early one morning, and when we checked the security camera, this is what was shown on it." She showed me the photo below: the camera even picks it up as a 'person'. I took a photo with my phone from her phone, so sorry if quality is not the best.

Andy Fear (real name!)
Kent



SMART SERVICES

Person Detected

Rose Court: Garage camera detected a Person at 02:49.

those now referred to as Zizians most definitely are and were.

Kate Lowe
Coalville, Leicestershire

Editor's note: We appreciate that this remains a thorny subject, arousing strong feelings on both sides; therefore, barring any further developments in the Zizians story, this correspondence is now closed.

Human/corvid team-ups

Recently, I read a five-year old online conversation concerning an eccentric of Dennistoun, Glasgow, who was well known in the area for his personal 'army' of crows. Apparently, they would accompany him and his dog everywhere he went. I can't find out much more about this gentleman, but it's a powerful image and I was curious to know if any of your readers can produce any more instances – current, historic or mythological – of such human/corvid teams.

Lex Lamb
By email

Nosher and others

Thanks for the obituary of Nosher [**FT464:22-23**], who I first met back in the 70s. I remember him standing up on the (original) pyramid stage at some little festival on his land in the Welsh mountains and proclaiming, "I have broken the law every day since I was 16…" to rapturous applause.

In the Christmas issue [**FT465:59**], I noticed a review of the book *Prospero's Isle: Gerald Gardner and Witchcraft on the Isle of Man*, written by our friend John Callow. Just too young to have met Gerald Gardner, I nevertheless had a close relationship with the couple who inherited his estate. Back another decade for those memories.

Dave Miles's letter about waking at an appointed hour [**FT465:65**] also prompted me to write. Over 60 years ago, the headmistress of my school somehow imparted to me the arcane knowledge of how to do this. And ever since it has never failed me. I think it mostly involved telling oneself the time required, and backing it up with a reckoning of the number of hours until then. Incidentally, I have also passed this 'trick' on to several insomniacs who use it 'in reverse' to ensure x-hours of sleep. There is no logical reason for this to work, so how does it? Magic, maybe?

Lynda Richardson
Doneraile, Co. Cork, Ireland

All Greek

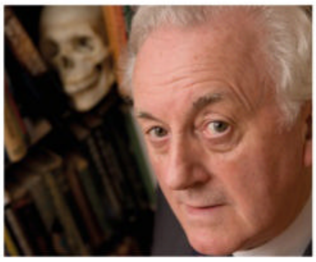
With reference to Gary Lachman's article on Greek dream oracles [**FT464:34-39**], I am very reluctant to correct its author (especially as he was a member of the fabled Blondie), but the king of Mycenae was Agamemnon, married to Clytemnestra, Helen's sister. Menelaus was king of Sparta. Also, the Mask of Agamemnon has been attributed to some decades, if not longer, before the time of Agamemnon; it could even be that of Atreus, the father of Agamemnon and Menelaus, or even that of Perseus.

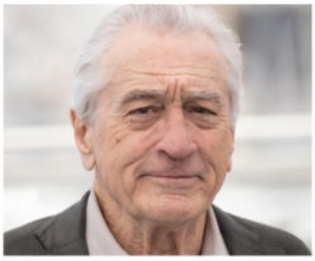
Sylvia D Vidler
Leiston, Suffolk

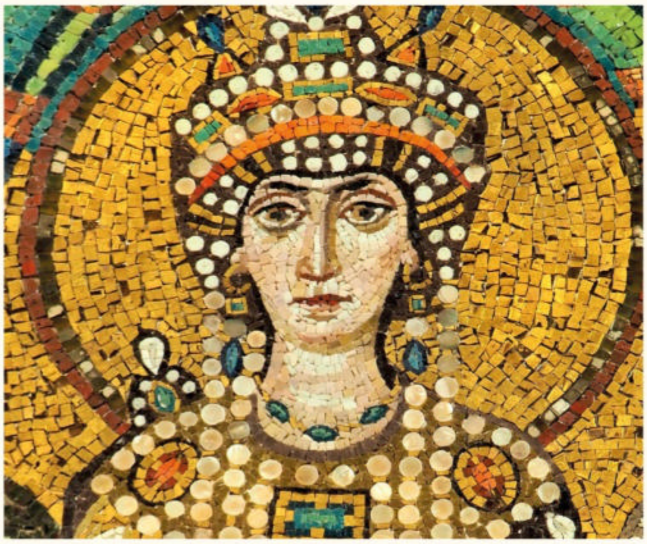
A spitting image?

Is it just me , or does the photo of "The late Rev Towyn Jones" [**FT463:19**] look exactly like Robert De Niro?

Mark J Pearson
By email
[Ed: It's just you.]







Empress Theodora's Demon

I have just finished reading a 1988 biography of Byzantine Empress Theodora by French historian Michel de Grèce, *Le Palais des larmes* ('Palace of Tears'). It includes a scene in which senior Byzantine official Peter Barsymes, two assistants, the Empress and her lady-in-waiting call on a demon. This entity is then instructed to punish Pope Vigilius, who had betrayed Theodora.

Michel de Grèce describes the scene as follows (my summary/translation):

On Good Friday (no year is given), Theodora and her friend/lady-in-waiting Indara meet Peter Barzymes and two other men in the private chapel of one of the imperial palaces of Constantinople. They burn incense and an unknown substance, light candles, sprinkle holy oil over themselves, and draw crosses over their foreheads with the same oil. Peter's assistants dance in a whirling pattern while uttering great cries or mumbling incomprehensibly, arms raised, eyes rolling upwards. Peter chants first in Hebrew, then in Greek, calling an earthly demon by all its names and titles, insulting, begging and urging it in a proper dialogue, at times stopping and staring straight ahead as if seeing an apparition, while angrily asking for help from God and the saints.

Nearby is a large white marble sarcophagus carved with magical masks and figures, unearthed by builders and believed by Theodora to house a demon. This entity suddenly appears at the window, in the shape of a huge dark black dog, accompanied by a putrid smell. Theodora orders it to enter Vigilius's body, take over his willpower and turn him into her obedient slave. Meanwhile, Indara writhes and screams that she can feel succubi crawling over her body. Peter presses his thumb onto her forehead, which calms her down. He then puts out the lamps and throws the candles to the floor. Silence and darkness prevail once more. When Indara lights a candle, the demon, Peter, his assistants and the foul smell have all gone.

Two days later, it is announced that Pope Vigilius has been feeling so weak, absent-minded and debilitated that he had to be replaced by patriarch Menas at the Resurrection service. A monk was tasked with exorcising him, a markedly violent and excruciating process, with Vigilius dropping to the floor, tearing his clothes, pulling his hair out and scratching his face.

It would be great if your in-house classicist Barry Baldwin could elaborate on this diabolical imperial punishment. Michel de Grèce sadly died last year, so we can't ask him if he invented this scene or if it is referenced in any of the classical texts about Theodora.

Valérie Dabbs
Castelnau-le-Lez, France

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

Dead kangaroo mystery

We live around the Hepburn area of North Central Victoria, Australia. Our property backs onto the Wombat State Forest, and we have lived on it for close to 20 years.

Over the past few years, we've noticed something decidedly odd happening with kangaroos and rabbits on our land.
It started with my finding the guts and internal organs of a rabbit – heart, lungs, kidneys and whatever else is required to make a rabbit effectively do rabbit stuff. They were all laid out neatly in a row along the driveway to the rear of our property. Odd, but maybe just some loon playing a prank. The world is full of weird things and weird people.

Some months later, we found the internal organs of a mid-sized grey kangaroo laid out across the paddock. Again odd, but...? Then we found its body. It had been eviscerated, and here's the weird part: its scalp had been removed, taking the skin and ears cleanly off the top of its head. Imagine a macabre Mouseketeer hat cut from the scalp of a kangaroo; neat, almost surgical cut; no damage to the tissue underneath.

The thing lay in the paddock untouched by other animals for days. I finally dragged it away when it got really ripe.
Then it happened again. Bigger kangaroo eviscerated and scalp removed in the same way. Left untouched by foxes or anything else that naturally moves in on dead animals.

Months later, we found another even bigger kangaroo along the fence where our property meets the forest. Not gutted, just scalped. I thought I would try setting up a trail camera to see what was doing the damage, if it decided to return. It returned all right. It opened the chest of the kangaroo; the heart, lungs and liver were gone. It left the kidneys and guts lined up across the paddock.

So, what did we capture on the trail cam? Nothing. The thing went off about 100 times during the night, but there was nothing to see, apart from a passing wombat and a very cautious looking fox. I tried resetting the camera with fresh batteries and set it up again that night.

WOMBAT
STATE FOREST

> “Then it happened again. Bigger kangaroo eviscerated and scalp removed in the same way”

Whatever was eating the kangaroo dragged it under the fence toward the forest. Judging by its size, I think the kangaroo probably weighed somewhere around 70-80kg – no easy task for a fox. The thing dragged the kangaroo under a tightly-strung wire fence. Whatever it is, it's big.

The camera? Batteries went flat; the SD card was corrupted and is now unusable.

On another occasion, we found another scalped kangaroo just on the border of the forest. Nothing touched it, and it eventually just rotted away. One thing I noticed with this one was that whatever had killed it had taken it down by grabbing its throat – its windpipe was crushed and there were traces of blood on its neck.

In the last days of August 2024 I found a small kangaroo dead under a tree bordering the neighbouring property. I intended to dispose of it on a pile of tree branches I was going to burn later that day, but forgot all about the kangaroo, so it remained where I'd found it. I mentioned to my wife that I had found another dead kangaroo. She said she'd noticed a small kangaroo lying on the ground in the area the day before. We went to get the body to put on the burn pile, but it was gone.

We looked around and found its guts laid out across the paddock. A short distance away we found the little kangaroo. It looked like the Alien had burst out of its chest; its rib cage was partially gone, and all of its internal organs were missing.

So, I set up a good quality trail camera, with fresh batteries and a new SD card, to try to get video of the thing if it came back for the rest of the kangaroo. It not only came back, but it also took the body of the kangaroo away with it.

The camera picked up nothing except for some great shots of me setting it up and checking it the next morning. Nothing else. I have set this camera up to get pictures of foxes, rabbits and kangaroos. It works perfectly, and is triggered when anything passes by. The dead kangaroo was about three metres from the camera, so it should have been triggered.

Sometime when I let our dog out at night, she will go to the end of the stairs, sniff the wind and refuse to go any further. I have smelled a distinct odour of sewage and something rotten and dead in the wind, sometime several times on a warm clear night. It's there, then it's gone. Funny thing is, I smelled that odour a few nights back and went to check our septic system, thinking there might be a problem. When I stepped off of the stairs, the odour immediately went away, as if whatever was causing the smell moved off when I went toward it. Sensor lights go on around the house when there is no wind, or movement of bushes, trees, or animals around.

I have no idea what is going on, but I do know it is weird and creepy.

Gary Smith
By email

Stress and static

My wife has been suffering from health issues lately, which has been causing us some stress. I believe this has led to problems with electrical items in the house, some of which on their own might not seem significant as other explanations might fit or have other causes.

Firstly, the TV turned itself off and then back on again twice in a row. A recording I set up for BBC Scotland turned up as coming from BBC Ireland. The air fryer, when switched on at the wall, twice started up a programme that had not been set. The kitchen wall clock, when it turned over to British winter time, twice changed back to summer time setting. Lastly, I was typing up a document on the desktop computer, when my wife popped in and said something, which immediately appeared on the screen in the form of written words, without me having it on voice mode.

As I say, taken individually these incidents might have natural explanations, but when they happened over a few days and under such emotionally tense situations, it makes it seem that there might be more to it. Also there was some evidence of static being present. For instance, when grabbing the shower's metal frame I received a static shock, where a spark shot across my hand and seemed to come out on the other shoulder.

Tony Sandy
By email

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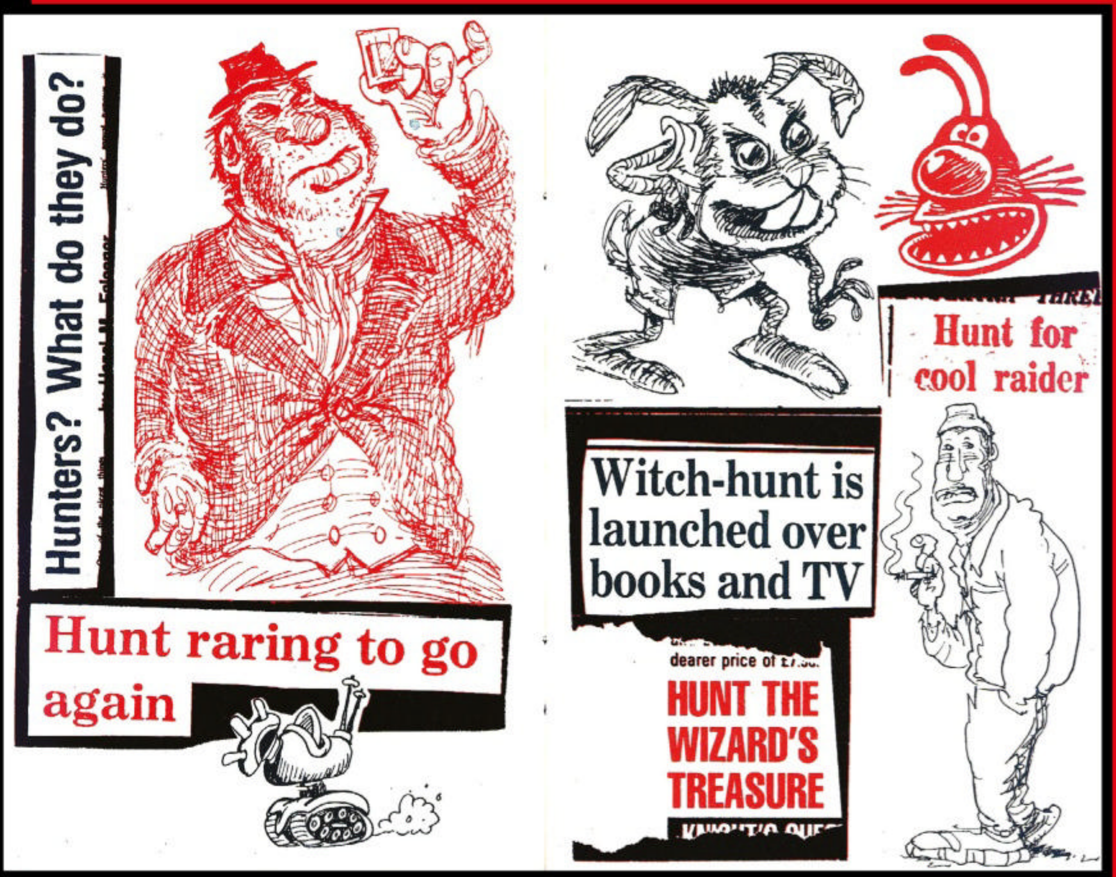
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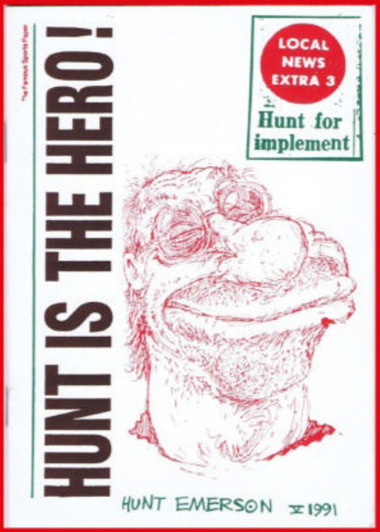
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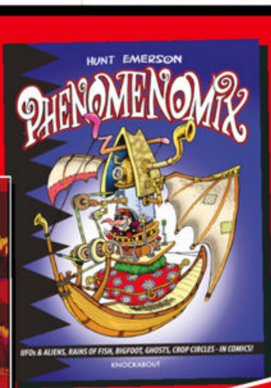
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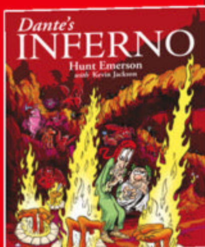
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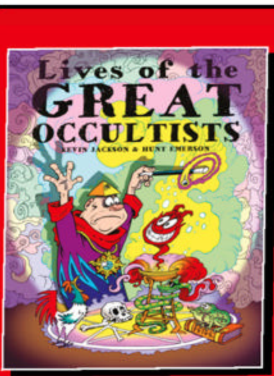
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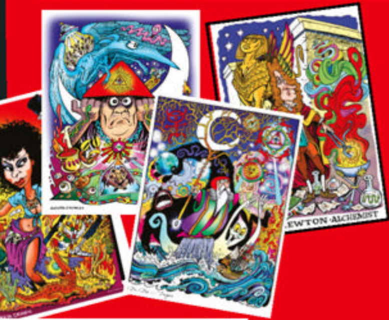

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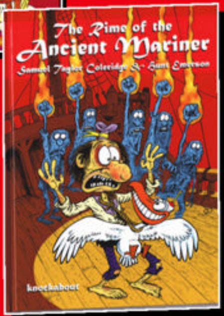
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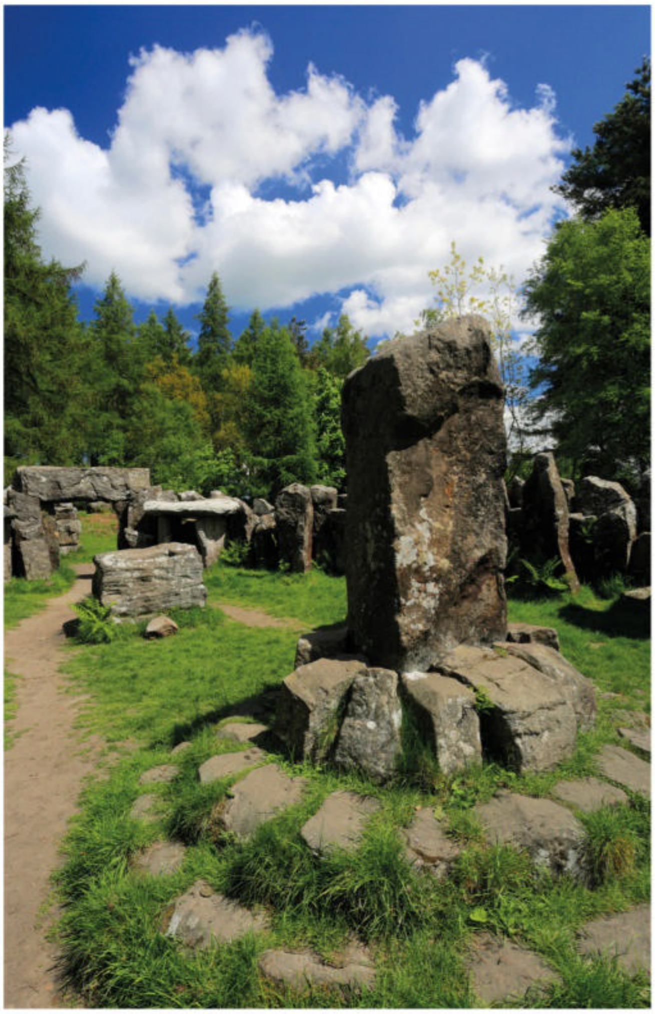
Fortean Traveller

148. Druid's Temple, Ilton, North Yorkshire

STEVE TOASE explores one of North Yorkshire's stranger picnic spots – a 19th century folly masquerading as a prehistoric stone circle that once boasted its own ornamental hermit...



DAVE PORTER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Think of ancient monuments in North Yorkshire, and the vast Thornborough Henges will probably come to mind first, maybe followed by the Devil's Arrows a little further away at Boroughbridge. Nearby, in an area of woodland on an old North Yorkshire country estate, is another complex: a series of stone monuments centred around an enigmatic stone circle.

The name Druid's Temple suggests the activities of Britain's ancient priests. Though modern Druids continue their connection with stone circle sites like Stonehenge, archæological research has long since severed the connection between Druids and stone circles, pushing the origin of these enigmatic monuments back to the Neolithic.

So is Druid's Temple a sign of Stone Age activity in the depths of the Yorkshire countryside? Alas no, but this doesn't stop it being a place with a fascinating history, and well worth a visit by any forteans who find themselves in the area.

Rather than a Neolithic community, Druid's Temple was constructed by William Danby in the 1800s – or, to be precise, by labourers in his employment.

Druid's Temple is a folly. Whereas many follies of the time drew inspiration from Greek and Roman ornamental architecture, Danby seems to have drawn his from the prehistoric architecture of the British Isles.

Generally, a folly is decorative, intentionally constructed, with no obvious practical purpose, though it looks like it could have had one, and a degree of imitation of a particular type of construction. Behind the construction is often a motivation beyond creating a pretty monument. In some situations, the building of a folly can be used to generate work for the local population, and that seems to have been the case with William Danby. Some accounts talk about him paying a shilling a day, and suggest that this was in response to the financial struggles after the Napoleonic Wars. This would support a date of 1820, which is often quoted, but the actual date is uncertain: possibly late 18th century, or early 19th century. The official Historic England National Heritage listing gives a date of circa 1800.

Bike clubs in the early Eighties regularly went to the Temple

'Stone circle' is a slightly misleading description. Druid's Temple is more oval in shape, described in the official listing as a "vesica piscis", the central shape created when two circles intersect. Behind this, set some distance back, is a smaller circle, with a balanced column of stones, said to represent the Zodiac or an unnamed deity.

This main part of the monument contains lots to explore, including trilithons, monoliths, and a sacrificial stone. At the far end of the monument is a screen of stones, and once you go behind this, you find an antechamber leading to a tomb. Of course, this tomb never contained the dead, but it hasn't always been empty.

The ornamental hermit had a long history in the British Isles, experiencing a peak in popularity during the Georgian period. Landowners would advertise for men (and it was almost exclusively men) to come and live in their ornamental gardens and become living artefacts.

Joseph Pocklington sought a hermit for his Lake District estate who would live there for seven years, and in that time not wash, cut his hair, or trim his nails. Another house owner offered £300; in return, the chosen candidate would "remain bearded and in a state of picturesque dirtiness for six months in the year in an artificial cave at a suitable distance from the house – just far enough (but not too far) for the fashionable house-party, with its court of subservient poets and painters, to visit, walking there in the afternoons, peering into the semi-darkness with a little thrill of wonder and excitement."

William Danby is believed to have employed a hermit to occupy the chamber within the circle for seven years, and in that time to let his hair and beard grow, while speaking to no one. It may come as no surprise that the gentleman

DAVE EDWARDS / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: It may look like North Yorkshire's answer to Stonehenge, but the Druid's Temple is far from ancient, having been constructed by local man William Danbury in the early 1800s, probably as an attempt to alleviate local unemployment. **FACING PAGE AND BELOW:** The site includes numerous trilothons and stone 'columns'.

in question did not make it to seven years. If the reports of him lasting four years are true, he stuck it out longer than most, though he was apparently driven insane by his unconventional employment.

Druid's Temple continued to be a focus of interest into the 20th century, with many different groups visiting over the years. In 1958, the *Harrogate Advertiser* reported on the Ilton Methodist Chapel organising a tea party for 300 people at the monument, with permission granted by the Forestry Commission.

By the early 1980s, the site was attracting a very different type of visitor. An article from 1982 with the headline "Hell's Angels spend night at temple" reports on how "Hell's Angels from the north of England seem to be using the old Druid's Temple in Swinton Park for ritualistic ceremonies."

After describing the monument itself, and claiming that Mashamshire is recognised as an important base for Druids, the article outlines four important festivals and says that they were often celebrated on the sixth day of the moon with fire. It then goes on to claim that if the bikers "are following the ancient religious order, which involved sacrificing offerings to the gods, Saturday's visit to the Druid's Temple coincided with the sixth day of the new moon and was close to the end of October".

While there is no doubt that bike clubs in the early Eighties regularly went to Druid's Temple, they were almost certainly more interested in partying than paganism.

Yet, Druid's Temple definitely acquired a reputation for strange activity, and is probably one of a handful of monuments around the country to have been mentioned in Hansard for Devil worship.

On 26 June 2000, Baroness Masham of Ilton took part in a House of Lords debate about public access to the countryside. As well as talking about a large gathering of people from Manchester who took over the place for the whole night in order to have a rave, Baroness Masham also described another encounter at the stone circle.

"One Sunday afternoon, my

STEVE TOASE

STEVE TOASE

DAVE EDWARDS / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: Druid's Temple has proved a popular spot for bikers, teenagers and possibly occultists. **BELOW:** Esoteric symbols have been scratched into some of the stones.

secretary was going for a walk with a friend when she found a pig's head sitting on the altar, which gave her a terrific shock. It is thought that there has been Devil worship there."

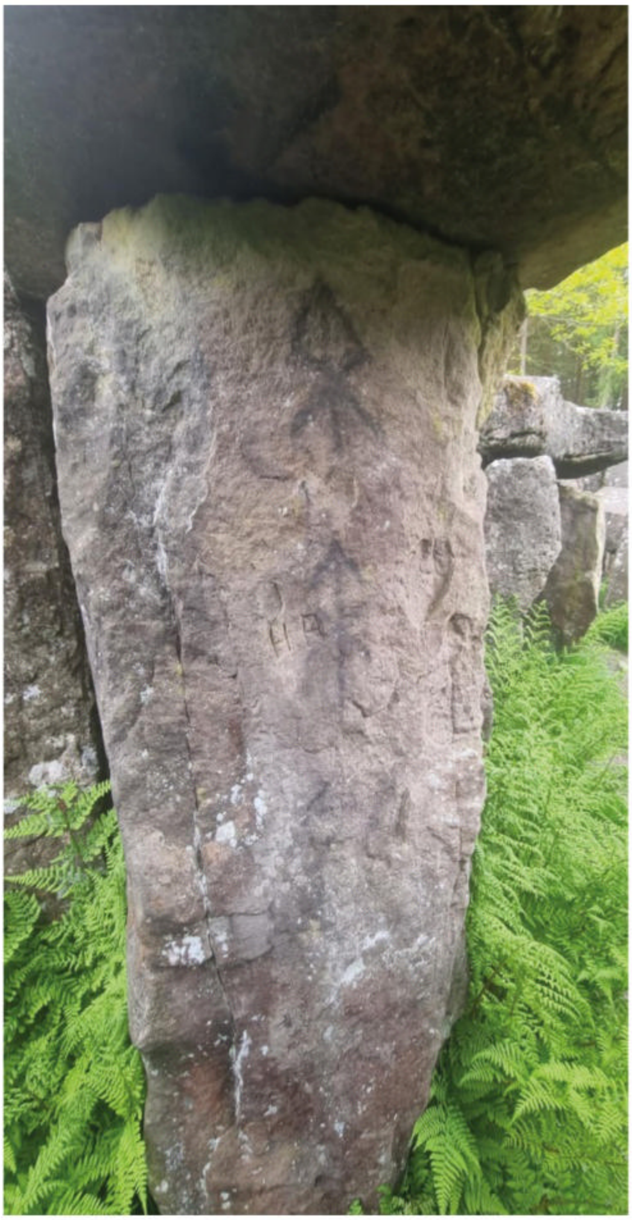
In a blog post from 2010 David Raven talks about a previous trip to Druid's Temple by Tony Lidell of the now defunct Otherworld North East Research Society. During Tony's visit, he spotted and photographed esoteric symbols scratched on the rocks. Afterwards, Tony showed these symbols to an occultist who suggested they were reminiscent of travelling magic or summoning.

Other accounts talk of encounters with entities by campers during the night, with disembodied shadows seen moving over the monument. Again, Duchess Masham mentioned in her House of Lords statement: "On another occasion, I had to leave home early one morning. Just outside Masham, I found a small group of Leeds University students who had spent the night at the Druid's temple. They were cold and frightened. With the night shadows and the country noises, such as owls hooting, they had fled."

These days, anyone wishing to spend the night can stay in more luxurious accommodation at the Swinton Bivouac, with various 'glamping' options a short walk from the stones.

There is no doubt that Druid's Temple has long been a party location, a place for teenagers to camp and frighten themselves, and an attraction for those carrying out rituals (as well as the pig's head mentioned above, candle stubs and pagan designs have been found here); but it is also an excellent place for a gentle stroll on a Sunday afternoon.

The main Temple is easily accessible, and with other stone monuments of a similar vintage in the surrounding woods, there is plenty to explore, before returning to nearby Masham for a cup of tea or a visit to the Black Sheep Brewery.



PHIL LEGARD

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https://www.swintonestate.com/bivouac/

https://davidraven-uk.blogspot.com/2010/01/druids-temple.html

STEVE TOASE is a regular FT contributor. He is an archæologist and the author of *Dirt Upon My Skin* (2024), a collection of archæology-themed horror stories from Black Shuck Books that was shortlisted for a British Fantasy Award. His first novella, *Crawl Space*, will be published in 2026. He lives in Germany.

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FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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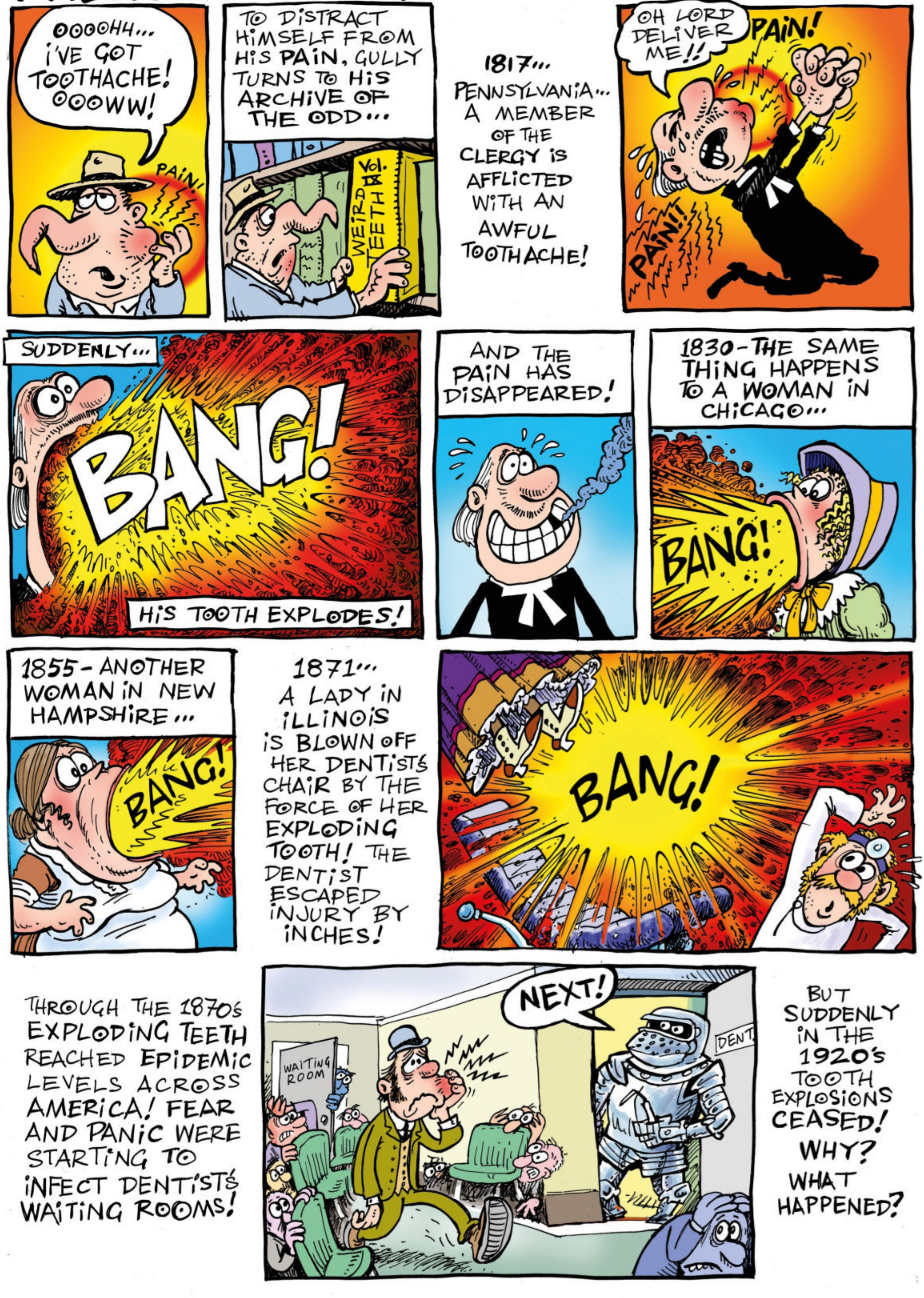
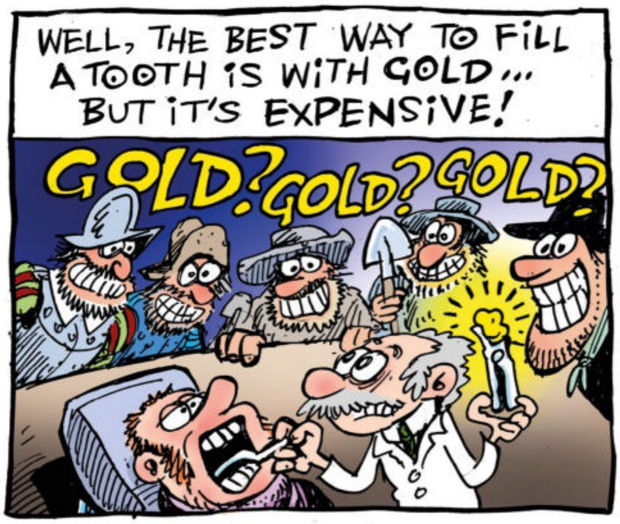
PHENOMENOMIX

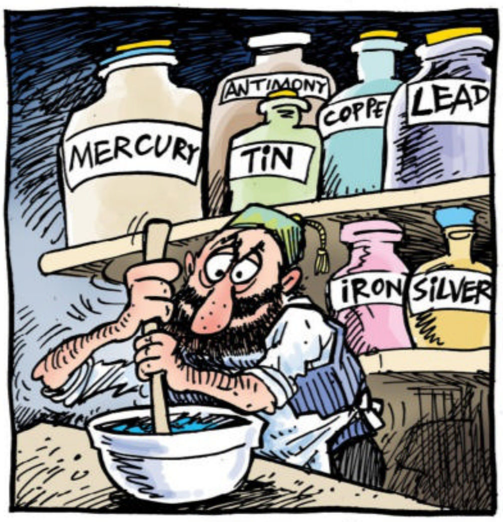
EXPLODING TEETH

HUNT EMERSON and ROB GANDY

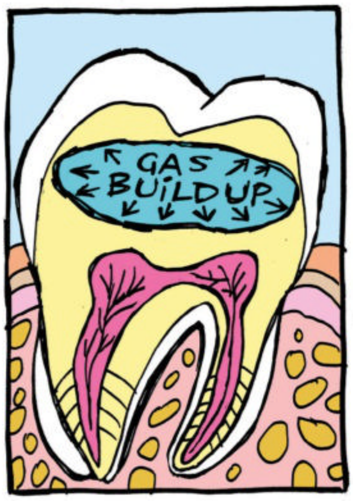

OOOOHH... I'VE GOT TOOTHACHE! OOOWW!
PAIN!
TO DISTRACT HIMSELF FROM HIS PAIN, GULLY TURNS TO HIS ARCHIVE OF THE ODD...
Vol. IX WEIRD TEETH
1817... PENNSYLVANIA... A MEMBER OF THE CLERGY IS AFFLICTED WITH AN AWFUL TOOTHACHE!
OH LORD DELIVER ME!!
PAIN!
PAIN!
SUDDENLY...
BANG!
HIS TOOTH EXPLODES!
AND THE PAIN HAS DISAPPEARED!
1830 - THE SAME THING HAPPENS TO A WOMAN IN CHICAGO...
BANG!
1855 - ANOTHER WOMAN IN NEW HAMPSHIRE...
BANG!
1871... A LADY IN ILLINOIS IS BLOWN OFF HER DENTIST'S CHAIR BY THE FORCE OF HER EXPLODING TOOTH! THE DENTIST ESCAPED INJURY BY INCHES!
BANG!
THROUGH THE 1870's EXPLODING TEETH REACHED EPIDEMIC LEVELS ACROSS AMERICA! FEAR AND PANIC WERE STARTING TO INFECT DENTIST'S WAITING ROOMS!
WAITING ROOM
NEXT!
DENT
BUT SUDDENLY IN THE 1920's TOOTH EXPLOSIONS CEASED! WHY? WHAT HAPPENED?

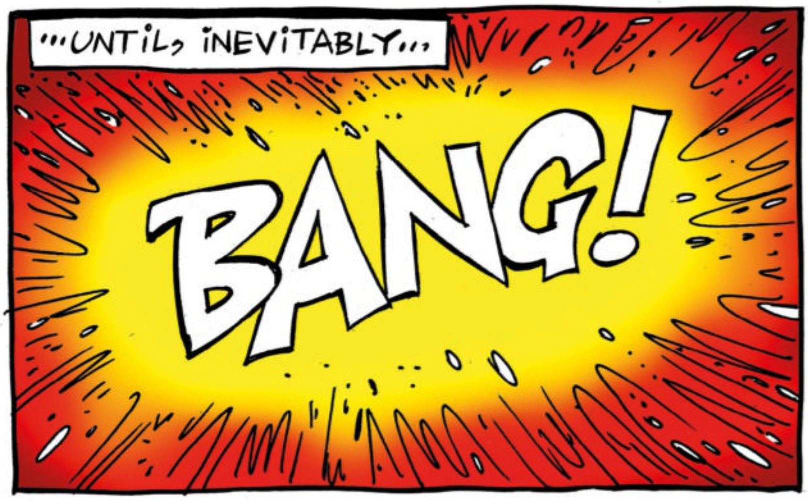

WELL, THE BEST WAY TO FILL A TOOTH IS WITH **GOLD**... BUT IT'S **EXPENSIVE**!
GOLD? GOLD? GOLD?

IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY MOST PEOPLE COULDN'T AFFORD GOLD, SO DENTISTS MIXED THEIR OWN, MORE AFFORDABLE FILLINGS...

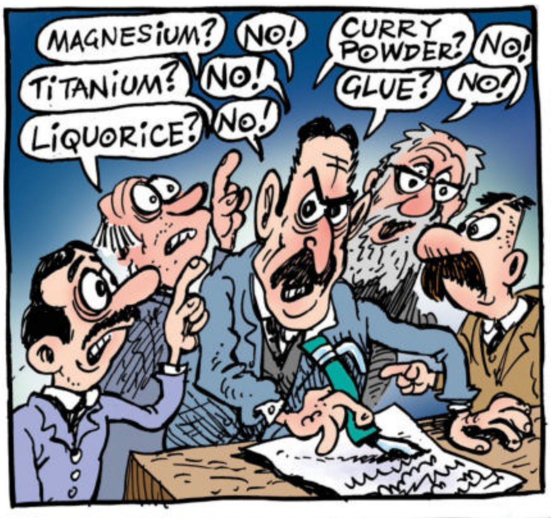

MERCURY
ANTIMONY
TIN
COPPE
LEAD
IRON
SILVER

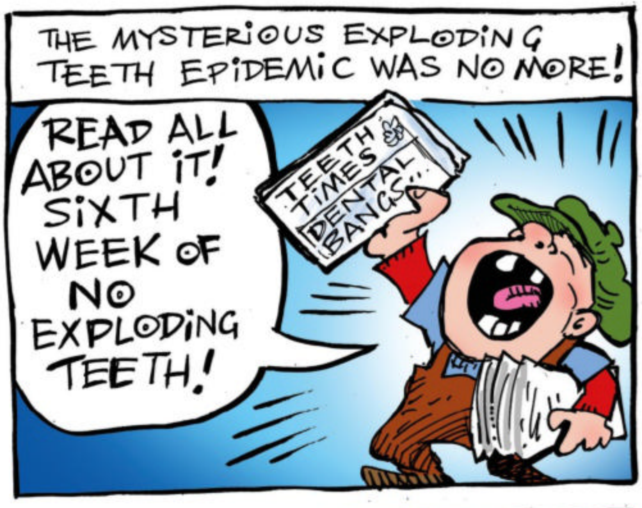
BUT THEY **DIDN'T KNOW** THAT SOME METALS CHEMICALLY REACT TOGETHER, RELEASING A GAS THAT BUILT UP PRESSURE...

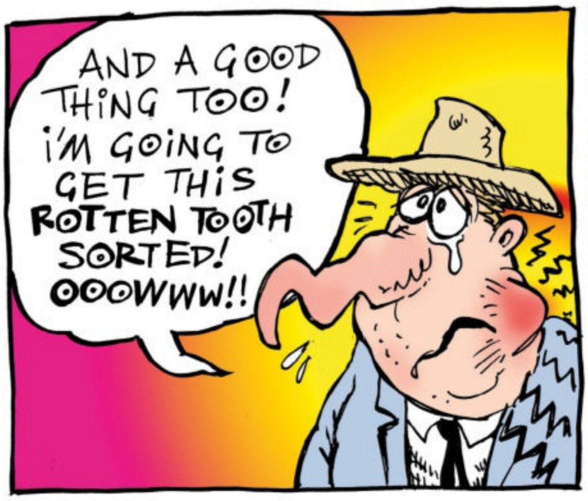

GAS BUILDUP

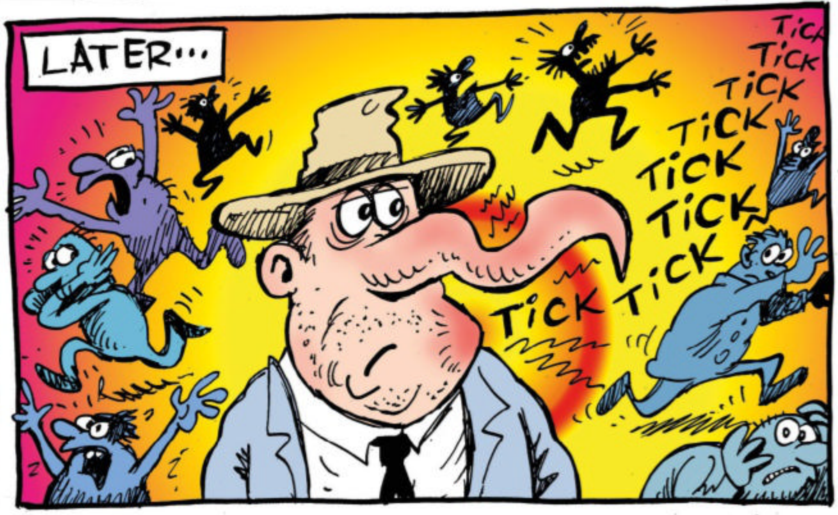

...UNTIL, INEVITABLY...
BANG!

IN THE **1920s** NEW **STANDARDS** WERE PUT **IN PLACE**! DENTAL FILLINGS WERE LEGAL AND **SAFE**!


MAGNESIUM? NO!
TITANIUM? NO!
LIQUORICE? NO!
CURRY POWDER? NO!
GLUE? NO!


THE MYSTERIOUS EXPLODING TEETH EPIDEMIC WAS NO MORE!
READ ALL ABOUT IT! SIXTH WEEK OF NO EXPLODING TEETH!
TEETH TIMES
DENTAL BANGS...


AND A GOOD THING TOO! I'M GOING TO GET THIS **ROTTEN TOOTH** SORTED! **OOOWWW!!**


LATER...
TICK TICK TICK TICK TICK TICK TICK TICK

Coming Next Month

FALLING TO EARTH

THE AURORA, TEXAS, SPACESHIP CRASH OF 1897

SUFFRAGETTES & PSYCHICS

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF HANNEN SWAFFER

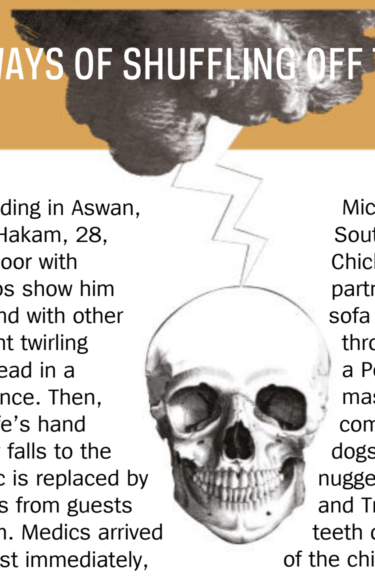
+ PECULIAR PLANTS, TAPEWORM DIETS, CHANGELINGS IN COURT AND MUCH MORE...

FORTEAN TIMES 468

ON SALE 19 FEB 2026

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



Following their wedding in Aswan, Egypt, Ashraf Abu Hakam, 28, took to the dancefloor with his new wife. Videos show him dancing with her and with other guests, at one point twirling a pole above his head in a traditional Saidi dance. Then, as he takes his wife's hand again, he suddenly falls to the floor and the music is replaced by screams and gasps from guests crowding round him. Medics arrived on the scene almost immediately, but were unable to revive Hakam, who coroners determined had died instantly of a massive heart attack. Prior to his unexpected death Hakam was thought to have been in excellent health, with no indication that he was suffering from any heart problems. Also dying unexpectedly was Adna Rovčanin-Omerbegović, 26, a nurse and social media beauty influencer from Bosnia. She was taken ill during her wedding reception and rushed to hospital, where despite the efforts of medics she slipped into a coma, dying two days later. The cause of her death has not been released, but local social media suggested that she may have suffered a concussion just prior to the ceremony, although one post suggested poisoning, without providing any evidence. *express.co.uk, 27 Sept 2025; nationalworld.com, 22 Sept 2025.*

While walking along Lowestoft seafront with her daughter and dog, Saffron Cole-Nottage slipped and fell onto the jumbled rocks which form the town's sea defences. She managed to get up, but lost her footing on the slippery rocks and ended up jammed face down between two of them, unable to extricate herself. Her 11-year-old daughter and several passers-by struggled to pull her out, but failed, and faced with a rising tide, called emergency services. Police, fire ambulance and coastguard all attended the scene, but did not arrive before the tide started to wash over Cole-Nottage's head, and by the time they succeeded in freeing her, she had drowned. Locals noted that the path is always treacherous due to algæ, saying "the surface is just like green slime. It's like an ice rink and slippery as hell." As a consequence, access is restricted, but Cole-Nottage had ignored the signs and stepped over a low barrier to reach the path. *D.Mail, 8 Mar 2025.*

Michelle Hempstead, 34, from Southend-on Sea, was eating Chicken McNuggets with her partner Samuel West on the sofa in her flat, occasionally throwing one to her dogs, Pom, a Pomeranian, and Trigg, a mastiff-rottweiler cross, who competed to grab them. As the dogs tried to seize one of the nuggets, Hempstead turned away and Trigg accidentally closed his teeth on part of her arm instead of the chicken morsel, severing an artery. West said: "She was just caught in the crossfire." Bleeding copiously, Hempstead was rushed to the Royal London Hospital, but died the next day from multiple organ failure due to traumatic blood loss. *Times, 30 Sept 2025.*

FALLING TO EARTH

During an inquest into his wife Ann-Marie's death, Joe O'Gorman said that people are being lulled into "a false illusion of safety" by mobile phone manufacturers who promote their equipment as "waterproof". Ann-Marie, 46, had been found unresponsive in the bath at their family home and taken to Beaumont Hospital in Dublin where she was pronounced dead. Joe said he had found her lying on her side in the bath with no sign of any movement, and had noticed that her mobile phone was in the bath too, just touching the water and still attached to a three-metre (118in) long charging cable plugged into a socket in the adjacent bedroom. Lifting his wife out of the bath, Joe received a small electric shock and noted red marks on Ann-Marie's chest and hands. The coroner determined that she had died by electrocution, and forensic engineer Paul Collins told the inquest that the cable was just long enough to allow someone in the bath to hold the phone with their left hand. He believed that Ann-Marie had dropped the phone in the water and that as she turned to retrieve it her right-hand finger came into contact with the handle of a shower attachment, creating a path to earth, which caused the electric current to pass through her body. Collins noted that while mobile phone chargers had a low voltage, their electric current, at two amps, was "more than enough" to kill a person, adding, "Strange to say it, but if she had not taken her hand out of the bath, she would probably still be alive." *rte.ie, 1 Oct 2025.*

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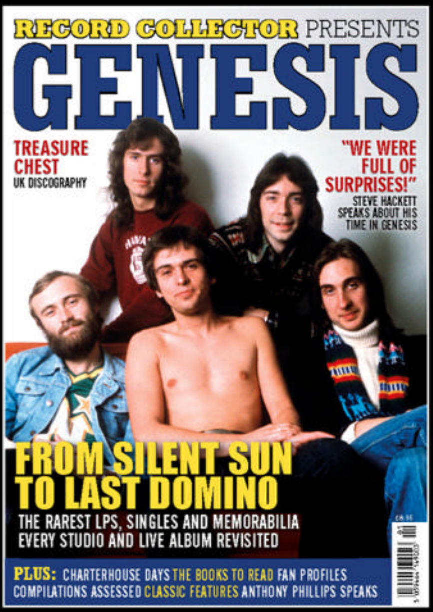
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